KEY ELEMENTS CONTRIBUTING TO EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE VISITOR CENTRES:

AN EVALUATION OF THE STRAHAN VISITOR CENTRE, TASMANIA, AUSTRALIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Visitor centres provide information and services and they orientate, entertain and educate tourists. Tourism is important to Tasmania's economic and social well-being and as a result, the State has positioned itself as a nature-based tourist destination. This direction has necessitated the building of additional visitor centres that contribute to the needs of tourists, the tourism industry, governments and the community. Consequently, many new Tasmanian visitor centres are being constructed. Given the resources required to build and maintain these centres, it is important to evaluate Tasmania's existing facilities to determine their overall effectiveness.

This report presents a case study evaluation of visitors to the Strahan Visitor Centre, Tasmania, Australia. The aim of this study is to determine the effectiveness of the Strahan Visitor Centre. To help answer this question, one of the primary objectives of the study was to determine who uses the centre, how visitors use the centre, what visitors think of the centre and what impacts the centre has on users. The fieldwork was conducted over a one-week period in January 2001 and it comprised two main components: visitor observations and a face-to-face structured visitor questionnaire survey. The second phase of the fieldwork involved the collection of qualitative data in the form of semi-structured key informant interviews. These interviews highlighted any broader issues contributing to the success or failure of the Strahan Visitor Centre, and they are used as a foundation on which to overlay the case study results and a discussion of this study's second primary objective regarding key visitor centre planning and design issues.

Elements that Contribute to Effective and Sustainable Visitor Centres

Success criteria contributing to effective visitor centres are complex and there is no prescriptive formula by which to plan or construct them. Although they need to be planned for on a case by case basis, these facilities also need to be part of a comprehensive, collaborative, cross-agency strategy to ensure they are built within a regional vision, brand and position. Before building a centre, it is essential for

planners to establish a clear need for the facility and ascertain if State government agencies, tourism operators and local communities are committed to being actively involved in the centre's on-going operations. As a result, it is important that government agencies, planners and designers value community, social and cultural capital and include all stakeholders in the planning and design process. In addition, location and the physical environment are important factors, and facilities should be designed for distinctiveness and built where the visitors and attractions are found. If visitor centres are to be sustainable, it is also important that planners and designers understand the audiences using or providing referral to a facility; provide multiple functions and innovative activities; and recognise economic realities. This overall framework helps to ensure that visitor centres meet the needs of governments, visitors, the tourism industry, local communities and cultural groups.

This study found a number of valid conclusions appropriate to the single case. It also identified a number of key elements that may contribute to effective and sustainable visitor centres generally. The sections in this report detailing these key elements and visitor centre evaluation techniques of most interest to industry include Section 2: Methodology, Section 3: Designing Effective Visitor Centres, Sub-Section 4.2.6: Importance of Visitor Centres to the Holiday Experience, Section 5: Case Study Evaluation and Section 6: Conclusions. This study found that effective and sustainable visitor centres generally include the following elements:

- **Identifying the need** and function of, any new centre before they are constructed.

- **Understand the audience(s)** to ensure that visitor centres meet visitor, management and community needs.

- **Clearly identify resources** and whether the visitor centre is to be self-, partly-, or fully funded?

- **Foster effective partnerships** to provide support and referral.

- **Consider ongoing operational and maintenance costs** and those who will provide the resources.

- **Value social, community and cultural capital** because communities provide ongoing support.

- **Provide personal experiences** because visitors seek experiences that are real, intimate and friendly.

- **Develop multiple functions** to provide a diverse revenue base.

- **Promote and market the facility** to ensure that visitors are aware of the visitor centre.

- **Choose the location carefully** and build the visitor centres where the attraction and visitors are found.

- **Visible and accessible entrances are essential** because they provide a sense of welcome and orientate visitors to a site or activity.

- **Provide distinct and innovative designs** to inspire the visitors.

- **Create distinct and authentic experiences** that are of the place or relate to the place.

- **Present important messages at the beginning of the experience** to ensure that visitors absorb new information while they are inspired and receptive.

- **Interstitial experiences are important** because they draw visitors from the environment into the facility and from the facility back into the environment.

- **Be innovative** because visitors seek new, distinct and interesting experiences.

- **Design a facility that evolves over time** to keep the visitor centre current, fresh and innovative.

Elements that Contribute to Interpretive Excellence

Visitor centres often provide interpretation and this study identified that telling a good story is an essential interpretive success factor.

Interpretation also needs to be provided in different ways and offer alternative experiences to ensure it appeals to as wide an audience as possible. In addition, interpretation and other interactive experiences can foster social capital and provide an opportunity for respecting the diversity of a community's values. This study found that interpretive experiences need to be:

- **Authentic**, credible, clear and related to the essence of that place.
- **Entertaining**, fun and enriching.
- **Personal**, because visitors remember experiences that appeal directly to them.
- **Learning experience**s, where messages are clear and related to the type of place you wish to present to others.
- **Community focused**, as interpretation will always be stronger with local involvement.

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF PLATES

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council (ANZECC)

Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM)

Department of Environment, Water and Environment (DPIWE)

Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage (DPWH) – now the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service

Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation (DoTSR) – now Tourism Tasmania

Ecologically sustainable development (ESD)

International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)

International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN)

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

Strahan Visitor Centre (SVC)

Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council (TALC)

Tasmanian Forestry Commission (TFC) – now Forestry Tasmania

Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service (TPWS)

The Round Earth Company (TREC)

Tasmanian Visitor Information Network (TVIN)

Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA)

Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment (VDNRE)

Visitor Centre (VC)

World Heritage Area (WHA)

ABSTRACT

This report presents a case study evaluation of the Strahan Visitor Centre, Tasmania, Australia. On-site visitors were surveyed using a structured questionnaire to determine who used the Centre and respondent's views regarding the facility. In addition, eight key informants with direct experience in Tasmania's tourism industry, or the design, management and operation of visitor centres, were interviewed to elicit their opinions on the Centre and the associated interpretation. The case study results, together with the qualitative, semi-structured key informant interviews, are used to discuss the main elements supporting effective and sustainable visitor centres. This report identifies that the Strahan Visitor Centre is popular with visitors. However, the study acknowledges that the Centre has also been controversial and it has attracted criticism from other stakeholder groups. As a result, it is important to also consider the needs of management, operators, and local communities and cultural communities. Recommendations include incorporating visitor centres within a comprehensive regional strategy, designing innovative and distinctive facilities, choosing the location carefully, providing multiple functions, adopting a consultative approach and including all stakeholders in the planning and design process.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

Visitor Centres (VCs) are facilities that provide information and services to tourists and they have management, industry, orientation or interpretive functions (Moscardo 1999; Wylde 1996). These facilities are a new element in Australia's landscape that have been created by tourism, and in the last twenty years they have gained favour with governments, government agencies, industry, tourists and local communities despite their expense in terms of capital and recurrent costs (Pearce 1991). Their place within the tourism industry has arisen due to a complex relationship between the messages, services and outcomes that governments, operators and local communities want (or are able) to deliver and the needs of those same communities and tourists.

Along with site based interpretation, Australian VCs can provide enriching visitor experiences and together, they constitute a potentially important intervention strategy in support of conservation objectives including visitor management and reduced pressure on sensitive areas. Whether it is called informing, educating or increasing understanding, the dominant aim of most VCs is to provide knowledge to visitors (Lee 1998). As such, many VCs house and complement interpretation and these facilities are one tool of an interpretative program. However, the planning of VCs in Australia is often ad hoc and many agencies or industry representatives have yet to establish clear policies, objectives and design criteria.

The rise of tourism has led to calls from both tourists and managers for an increase in services and facilities that are educational, authentic and sensitive to the environment. Interpretive VCs can help meet these demands and as a result, the building of VCs is likely to continue. Thus, if VCs are to be a cornerstone of environmentally friendly tourism and visitor management strategies, it is important that they are seen to be sustainable. However, the elements contributing to authentic and sustainable VCs vary depending on whose perspective is considered. In addition, Australian interpretation has yet to be aligned with wider environmental

education activities or corporate and business objectives, and it is questioned if these VCs either target interpretation effectively or are viable in the longer-term (Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment [VDNRE] 1999:v). Consequently, VCs should be planned systematically to ensure they are incorporated into comprehensive strategies that include clear and practical objectives, processes, guidelines and evaluation.

Interpretation is about communication and education. In VCs interpretation has the power to enrich visitor understanding and appreciation of the world around them, and their roles within it (Evans 2000; Moscardo 1999; Absher 1997; Cheatley 1994). However, this study recognises that the process of planning interpretation in architecturally designed VCs is not enough. Along with the facility itself, VC interpretation also requires careful design and evaluation throughout the development, installation and delivery stages, to ensure that it communicates programs and activities successfully, and captures the visitor's imagination (Beckmann 1999; Ballantyne and Uzzell 1999; Hall and McArthur 1998).

Evaluation is guided by the desire to understand and make informed judgments, choices and improvements. Given the resources needed to build interpretive VCs, like any other interpretive program they should undergo evaluation if they are to be accountable and successful. Therefore, systematic VC evaluation is vital, as it helps to assess a facility's performance and ideally, assessment should be undertaken from the beginning of the design program. Hall and McArthur (1998:192) define evaluation as 'a systematic, objective assessment of the effectiveness, efficiency and/or appropriateness of a program or part of a program'. Ham (1986:9) agrees, and adds that interpretive evaluation collects and analyses information about its audience, or its impact on an audience 'for the explicit purpose of improving its ability to serve the audience in intended ways'. He argues that evaluation is a necessary step towards unifying interpretation with other government agency functions including its mission statement and overall intent. Ham draws upon the work of Coke and Hansen (1974) and suggests that the entire evaluation process is meaningless outside its role in the political decision-making process, as the results will either support or refute the views of stakeholders or generate criticism of the interpretation or outcomes. Thus, according to Howard (1997),

VC evaluation provides information on a facility, its management and operation, visitors, and their appraisal of a given site, environment or display. In particular, VC evaluation provides information to agencies so they can make decisions on upgrading, updating, deleting, and adding components to ensure that information, services and interpretation are delivered effectively and economically. In addition, meaningful outcomes of the evaluation process can be incorporated into the design of new centres.

1.2 The Strahan Visitor Centre

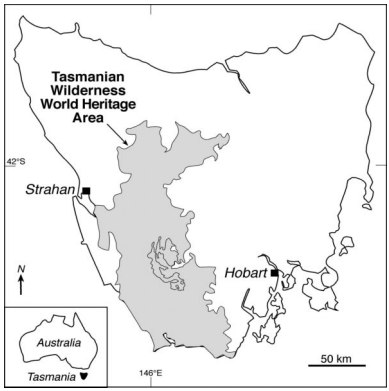
Strahan is located 287 km north west of Hobart on Tasmania's West Coast (Figure 1.1). This forestry, fishing and tourism town is located 10 km from the entrance to Macquarie Harbour. The harbour dominates the township, and it provides access to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA). The Strahan area has many natural and cultural attractions, close proximity to the TWWHA, and outstanding beauty including the unique contrast of seascape, mountains, temperate rainforest and rivers. World Heritage listing of the TWWHA was proclaimed in 1982 and expanded in 1989. The subsequent blockading of the Franklin River by environmentalists in 1982/83 attained international prominence and it is an integral part of the region's history. Strahan also has a rich human history and the township has an attractive waterfront and an important historical precinct. In addition, the historic Abt Wilderness Railway has recently opened, and the area has a number of ghost towns, mining and railway relics, and a rich convict history. These elements provide a rich base for the area's ecotourism and cultural industry.

The tourism study conducted by Evers Consulting Services Pty Ltd (1984) was one of the first to recommend that Strahan develop a major interpretive centre and heritage theatre. Cutler and Associates (1989 in Saunders 1990) agreed, and suggested that Strahan dramatise or interpret Tasmania's West Coast in terms of its history, people or the wilderness. Saunders (1990) built on these reports and in the *Tasmanian WHA Interpretation Strategy* he pointed out that the small existing Customs House VC provided an opportunity to promote the TWWHA to visitors. This building served as the Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage (DPWH) Strahan headquarters. However, as it was located away from the wharf area, the interpretation display

attracted less than 600 visitors/year (Cameron McNamara Pty Ltd 1990). During the same year Cameron McNamara Pty Ltd (1990) produced a *Tourism Development and Marketing Strategy* for Strahan, which recommended that interpretation be extended and re-located to a central position to attract more visitors. At the same time, the Tasmanian Forestry Commission (TFC) proposed a forest VC to provide information based on wilderness, fishing, forestry and mining themes. Given Strahan's need for information and interpretation, Cameron McNamara Pty Ltd recommended that one new integrated centre be constructed.

The Strahan Visitor Centre (SVC) was built with Federal WHA and TFC funds in November 1992 at a cost of one million dollars (Morris-Nunn and Flanagan 1994). This interpretive VC was commissioned by the Tasmanian government and the winning submission conceived by Kevin Perkins and Morris-Nunn Associates won a nation-wide competition to complete both the building of the Centre and the creation of its interpretation. The SVC was completed in eleven months after some consultation and involvement with the West Coast communities. Since this time, the Centre's overall concept, its design, interpretive text and images have been subject to considerable controversy from the Tasmanian government, tourism industry representatives and West Coast communities (*The Advocate* 1997; Morris-Nunn and Flanagan 1994; Spence 1993; Tasmanian Parliamentary Office 1992).

Figure 1.1 Tasmania identifying the location of Strahan and the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.



Flanagan (1996:181) describes the SVC as 'the world's first magical realist building'. According to Morris-Nunn and Flanagan (1994:3) the term 'magical realism' was first used to describe 'a school of South American writing that presented what was magic and special about a reality often wrongly dismissed as prosaic and ordinary'. As such, the SVC sought to recreate aspects of Tasmania's southwest wilderness in a new context and in a way that would shock visitors into recognising what was magic and special about the West Coast's remote, environmentally sensitive and cultural areas. In addition, Faggetter (1996:19) states the Centre helped a 'deeply divided community tell its many different stories'. The SVC was built around the overarching theme of human interaction with the TWWHA with particular emphasis on Strahan from 50,000 years ago to the present time (Flanagan 1996). In addition, the Centre claims to 'provide an experience for visitors that was not totally visual'; 'invest visitors with a sense of curiosity and wonder' for the area; and 'have visitors go beyond their preconceptions toward exploring' the TWWHA (Perkins *et al*. 1992:5-6). For those seeing the interpretive display (the display); it provides a substitute wilderness experience.

Today, a board of management including the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service (TPWS), Forestry Tasmania and key stakeholders controls the SVC and it is operated under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with The Round Earth Company (TREC). Even this process has not been without difficulty, and the Centre was initially managed in a partnership among three government departments (DPWH, TFC and the Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation [DoTSR]) and operated by the Strahan Visitor Centre Inc. At the time, it was intended that the local community should have a sense of involvement and ownership in the Centre, and that it was to become self-funding after four years. During 1996, West Coast Tourism Inc. formed, took over the Centre's operation and re-named it as the Strahan Wharf Centre. However, due to budgetary concerns they abandoned the building in 1997, when it closed for renovations. It reopened under the current agreement as the SVC in late 1997. From this time, the SVC's three main business streams have been visitor information, interpretation and merchandising. The Centre is also a member of the Tasmanian Visitor Information Network (TVIN) and it currently attracts approximately 82,000 visitors/year with up to 10,000 of these people paying to see an interpretive display (TREC

2000). Considering that 137,600 people visited Strahan for the year ending 2000 (Brkic 2001), this represents a conversion rate of approximately 60% to the SVC. However, both the Government and tourism industry question whether the Strahan or West Coast communities support the Centre, or if the current display entry fee of $AUD3.30 provides an adequate revenue base for this facility to remain viable in a cost recovery setting.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The TWWHA covers over 1.38 million hectares and occupies 21% of the State (TPWS 2000). This area is one of only twenty-three in the world that has both natural and cultural attributes and it is characterised by outstanding beauty. Given this area's unique qualities, the TWWHA has become an icon attraction with approximately 221,000 tourists visiting each year (Tourism Tasmania 1999a).

The rise in Tasmanian tourism has resulted in tourists and managers requesting additional visitor infrastructure that is sensitive to the environment, educational and authentic. As a result, many new interpretive VCs have been constructed in Tasmania to meet these needs. These facilities provide information and services and they orientate, entertain and educate tourists. In particular, they house and compliment interpretation and they aim to enrich visitor understanding and foster positive visitor values and behaviour (Moscardo 1999; Stewart *et al*. 1998). However, in addition to meeting visitor needs, interpretive VCs should also foster cultural exchange and social equity where local and cultural communities are empowered and participate in the tourism delivery experience (Scheyvens 1999).

Tasmania currently has three key interpretive TWWHA VCs located at Strahan, Cradle Mountain and Lake St Clair. Two new centres have also recently opened at Mt Field and Hastings Caves and others are being constructed. These centres occupy a strategic position in Tasmania's tourism industry and they can be the first and only contact that State government agencies have with users of the TWWHA or other environmentally sensitive areas. Despite the proliferation of Tasmanian VCs and the cost of building and maintaining these

facilities, it is not known how effective any of these centres are in terms of their sustainability, main informative functions or if they meet visitor and community needs. As a result, it is important to evaluate Tasmania's existing facilities to ensure they provide the best experience possible and assess if they are culturally, environmentally and economically sustainable.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study Aims and Objectives

This research was designed to fulfil two aims:

(a) to investigate key issues relevant to planning, designing and evaluating effective and sustainable VCs; and

(b) to analyse visitors to the SVC to determine: (i) who uses the Centre (ii) how visitors use the Centre (iii) what visitors think of the Centre (iv) and what impacts the Centre has on users.

The following objectives were developed to facilitate the achievement of the study aims:

(a) to examine via a literature review VC planning, design and evaluation criteria in order to review current practises;

(b) to select a visitor survey technique, develop a survey instrument and conduct an on-site structured questionnaire visitor survey at the SVC to assess visitor socio-demographics, and visitor motivations, attitudes, perceptions and opinions;

(c) to select a visitor observation technique and develop an observation checklist to assess visitor actions at the SVC;

(d) to conduct semi-structured key informant interviews to gain a broad understanding of relevant issues pertaining to VCs;

(e) to present quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data; and

(f) to apply the results and assess any broader implications within the context of sustainable VC planning, design and operation.

2.2 Research Approach

Research was conducted over a one year period with the field component taking place between December 2000 and February

2001. Two main phases of fieldwork were undertaken. The first phase evaluated the effectiveness of the SVC over a one-week period in January 2001. The second phase involved the collection of qualitative data in the form of semi-structured key informant interviews from January to February 2001. Extensive research was mainly quantitative, primarily explanatory and mainly concerned with discovering general patterns and distinguishing features of the SVC's visiting population. Intensive qualitative research provided context to the extensive research and focused on descriptive understanding and how some causal processes worked out in a particular case (Massey and Meegan 1985:150).

2.2.1 Formal summative evaluation

Evaluation techniques can be categorised into three evaluation types. As such, front-end (or systematic and planned evaluation) is conducted during the development of a VC or interpretive program and it is about assessing who are the potential visitors (Moscardo 1998; 1999; Serrell 1996). This type of assessment is becoming necessary when seeking approval and funding for projects. Formative evaluation is a systematic and planned process that is conducted once the VC is finished and it involves trialling and assessing pilot or draft forms of an interpretive activity or product to understand how it works (Lee 1998; Screven 1996). The advantage of conducting formative evaluation is that it is done before significant resources have been expended to produce and/or present an interpretative product or service.

Formal summative evaluation is a systematic and planned process focused on assessing the effectiveness of a VC or interpretation that is already in place (Moscardo 1999; Evans 1999; Bennett 1987). This evaluation type is an essential planning tool because it has the capacity to assess all facets of a centre or an interpretive display after the facility is operational. However, it is important to recognise that it may be difficult to use the results at a specific site because the VC or interpretation is already in place. However, formal summative evaluation has the capacity to identify a VC's strengths and weaknesses and the findings can be used to effect changes at the site or they can be incorporated into future VC planning, design and operation (Screven 1996).

Given the SVC has been operational since 1992 and the interpretation is in-situ, formal summative evaluation was undertaken. This strategy was appropriate because it had the potential to reveal mistaken assumptions or expectations by the exhibit team or management, any weaknesses or omissions that may be possible to fix with relative ease, and the thoughts, opinions, feelings and motivations of visitors.

2.2.2 Choice of case study

The SVC was selected in its own right as an extreme or deviant case because it offered a highly unusual manifestation of a Tasmanian interpretive VC in terms of success, failure and controversy (Patton 1990). According to Platt (1988:11), this type of case study as one that can demonstrate that its characteristics are possible and therefore it 'must be taken into account in the formulation of general propositions'. As such, the Centre provided juxtapositions, and although it offers an innovative design and interpretive experience, few visitors choose to see the interpretive display, the Centre has been subject to controversy (particularly with regard to a number of the interpretive themes including Aboriginal, gay rights, and conservationists/forest conflicts interpretation), and it has fought for political and financial survival. Finally, the case demonstrates the impact a VC can have on an area within the social context of a small community and Tasmania as a whole. As a result, the SVC presents a holistic range of issues, features and possibilities that are important when planning, designing, operating and evaluating other VCs.

2.2.3 Multi-method approach

The most appropriate way to gain an in-depth knowledge of the topic and to overcome problems with research validity, representativeness and bias, was to adopt a balanced multi-method quantitative and qualitative research approach. Often referred to as triangulation of method, this mixed strategy technique helped to overcome the deficiencies of any one method by 'combining and thus capitalising on their individual strengths' (Blaike 1988 in Minichiello *et al*. 1995:186; Moscardo 1999; Ballantyne *et al*. 1998, Carter 1997). As a result, different methods conducted in a time sequence stage were undertaken. The research started with a literature review. This knowledge was then used to develop the SVC on-site research. The

material drawn from this research was then used as a 'bouncing off' point for the key-informant interviews.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the SVC in the form of a face-to-face structured visitor questionnaire survey and behavioural mapping in the form of a visitor observations checklist. The emphasis was on 'standardised methodological procedures' that allowed for the generalisation of results from the sample to the Centre's visiting population (Neuman 2000:125). The researchers asked visitors a variety of questions regarding their behaviour, intentions, attitudes, awareness, motivations and demographic characteristics. Behavioural mapping was conducted half-hourly in and around the SVC to record those activities visitors undertook.

A quantitative and qualitative research approach was an appropriate method for analysing the survey and visitor observational data for the following reasons.

- The quantitative results were intended to be representative of summer visitors to the SVC.

- The emphasis was on the quantification of data in a formal and structured way to help ensure research objectivity, representativeness, replication and standardisation (Carter 1997; Malhotra *et al*. 1996).

- As part of the survey, qualitative data were collected and these results were intended to provide visitors 'the opportunity to challenge ideas on their own terms' and from their perspective (Robinson 1998:390).

- The survey was the most effective method of enlisting participant cooperation, and it provided a complex understanding of visitor characteristics as individuals' responses could be explored and probed in-depth (Ballantyne *et al*. 1998).

- Behavioural mapping was the most effective method to provide unobtrusive observational data without having to approach visitors directly (Moscardo 1999).

- Descriptive statistics utilising measures of frequencies, percentages, and cross tabulations were effective quantitative methods of analysis (Singleton and Straits 1999).

- Interpretive analyses where generalisations and clarification of meaning were made from the quantitative results to the overall population were an effective analytical tool (Jacobs 1999).

Qualitative data in the form of semi-structured key informant interviews considered an important component of this study. The qualitative data were used as a natural concomitant to the quantitative research and it provided contextual data to help improve the validity of the visitor survey (Minichiello *et al*. 1995:10). A qualitative research approach was an appropriate method for analysing key informant for the following reasons.

- The qualitative results were not intended to be representative.

- To ensure that 'detail, complexity and differentiation did not overwhelm the research', the key informant group was small (Massey and Meegan 1985: 153).

- Given that the key informants' had vastly different perspective's of the research topic, semi-structured interviews that were tailored for each subject was the most suitable method to elicit information (Singleton and Straits 1999; Minichiello *et al*. 1995).

- The emphases of the key informant datum were upon insight and understanding with 'an analysis of meanings in specific contexts rather than with a formulation of generalities' (Robinson 1998:409).

- The classification of the key informant datum into themes was an effective method of data analysis (Neuman 2000).

2.3 Data Collection

2.3.1 Structured visitor questionnaire survey

An integral method of data collection consisted of a face-to-face structured visitor questionnaire survey at the SVC (Appendix A). Initially, the target population was clearly identified and defined as all people visiting the SVC over the survey period. The target population was then divided into two groups – those accessing information and tourist services (the majority of visitors) and those paying to see the display (the subpopulation). A sampling frame was constructed to provide an operational definition of the target population. This rule of membership was defined as all visitors leaving the SVC. A sampling regime was then developed.

Probability sampling was undertaken to ensure the survey sample was representative of both the target population and subpopulation. A stratified sampling regime was used, where face-to-face personal interviews were conducted at centrally located intercept surveys. Each interviewer was strategically positioned outside the exits of the Centre to ensure that visitors leaving the facility were sampled regardless of which areas inside the facility they accessed. To commence the survey, each interviewer randomly selected a visitor as they exited the SVC. After this initial survey was completed, they approached one person from the next visitor group leaving the information foyer or display. The researchers calculated the sampling interval as the time taken to complete a survey.

Visitors paying to see the display were over-sampled disproportionately. As a result, the stratified and systematic sampling regime was modified to meet the SVCs specific sampling constraints for the following reasons.

- Visitors accessing information and tourist services are a large percentage of the total visiting population and it was anticipated that random processes would result in the survey-sampling target being easily met.

- Visitors accessing the display are a small percentage of the total visiting population and random processes could miss the stratum by chance.

- The researchers wished to question visitors seeing the display to elicit their opinions of, and interaction with, the exhibits.

- A larger sample size is more likely to reflect the full diversity of visitors seeing the display.

A target sample size of 200 surveys was calculated to produce specified or acceptable levels of accuracy for those accessing information and services (Rundle pers. comm. 2001). However, it was recognised that it might be difficult to achieve this target as the number of people visiting the display was low. Consequently, a minimum sample target of fifty responses was considered adequate for surveying visitors to the display (Carter 1997). This study recognises that the target samples may not be representative of the total visiting SVC population, however, they are likely to be representative of the target population for the peak summer holiday period.

2.3.2 Survey instrumentation

The survey was custom-built. Key stakeholders were consulted and draft questions were distributed to industry representatives. Language in the surveys was kept short, easy to understand and free of jargon or abbreviations. Leading and loaded questions were avoided and double-barrelled questions were separated. A combination of open- and closed-questions were used to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data, to change the pace of the survey and to help establish visitor rapport. Closed questions (structured, fixed response, numerical) were used to make responses quicker and easier for visitors, and to simplify coding and data analysis (Neuman 2000). These questions asked respondents to choose between several predetermined answers and they included a combination of Likert scales that offered a list of ranked responses, rating scales, lists, categories, and 'yes/no' answers. Open-ended questions (unstructured, free response, holistic) were included to improve the data richness, provide context and determine visitor attitudes,

perceptions and opinions (Robinson 1998; Minichiello *et al*. 1995). Neutral, non-attitudinal choices were included to ensure that respondents did not express an opinion on fictitious issues, and to help the researchers identify those without opinions or holding middle positions. Standard socio-demographic data were collected including gender, age, origin, education, social context, and visitors with mobility difficulties. Prompt cards were not used.

A pilot survey was completed at the SVC in December 2000. This survey was completed in one day and it targeted visitors during the off-peak tourist season. In total, 5% of the intended target sample was surveyed. Fifteen pilot surveys were successfully completed with fourteen respondents using information and tourist services and one paying to see the display. The pilot survey confirmed that approximately 10% of visitors pay to see the display and relevant findings were incorporated into the survey.

Face-to-face personal interviews were conducted at the SVC over a three-day period from 10 January to 12 January 2001. Respondents were questioned throughout the day to ensure all visitor types were targeted. The timing of the survey was carefully selected to coincide with Strahan's peak summer tourist season. The survey team comprised of three females and three males to reduce gender related interviewer bias.

2.3.3 Visitor survey validity

The visitor survey was an unbiased sample because respondents were randomly selected. After targeting the initial respondent by chance, each interviewer approached one person from the next group leaving the Centre or display. Given that approximately 10% of all visitors and most visitor groups to the SVC were surveyed (assuming 850 visitors to the Centre daily and an average group size of 3-4 people), the survey results for those accessing information can be generalised to the wider SVC visiting summer population (December - March). However, because fewer visitors see the display, these people were targeted disproportionately and approximately 19% of all visitors and 65% of all visitor groups accessing this area were sampled. Although the next visitor group leaving the display was selected, given the small sample size and the disproportionate sampling these results are less

generalisable to the wider SVC visiting summer population and only a broad overview can be taken regarding these results.

2.3.4 Response rate

In total, 287 visitors were approached, 252 visitor surveys were completed and 35 people refused to participate. All surveys completed targeted visitor information and tourist services and 50 surveys provided data specifically related to the display.

A survey's response rate is broadly defined as 'the percentage of the total attempted interviews that are completed' (Malhotra 1996:170). There is considerable debate amongst researchers as to what constitutes an adequate response rate for face-to-face interviews. However, most consider anything below 50% to be poor, 75% to be adequate and 90% as excellent (Neuman 2000). According to these criteria, the SVC response rate was high and 88% of all visitors approached in the survey completed the questionnaire. As a result, non-response bias effects are unlikely to have significantly skewed the survey results. Reasons given by visitors for not participating where a lack of time, lack of interest or because they did not speak adequate English.

2.3.5 Visitor observations

Visitor observations were conducted in a structured and systematic manner half-hourly during the survey period to compliment the research and assist in interpreting the visitor survey findings (Kearns 2000). The observations were conducted by the principal field researcher and they helped to establish the accuracy of visitor survey responses and determine how visitors actually behaved in and around the SVC. The method was developed after the researchers observed visitors during the pilot survey. An assessment was made on which factors and visitor actions could be recorded accurately. Given the Centre's lack of space and narrow pathways, the researcher considered that the most effective method of obtaining visitor information unobtrusively and in a manner where visitors behaved naturally was to conduct behavioural mapping. This technique required the observer to enter a setting at regular intervals and document what visitors were doing at that moment (Moscardo 1999).

Behavioural mapping was divided into two zones. All aspects of the Centre's immediate surroundings including the amphitheatre and information foyer were included into Zone A and the interpretive display was included in Zone B. A detailed observation checklist was developed to record visitor numbers and interactions at 35 locations in and around the Centre's zones (Appendix B). Given the small size of the Centre, the researcher was able to re-visit strategic positions throughout the Centre when collecting the observational data.

2.3.6 Semi-structured interviews with key informants

An important data collection method consisted of semi-structured interviews with key informants who had specific and in-depth knowledge of the research topic. The subjects were selected by approaching the SVC, State and Local government departments, interest groups, interpretive designers, and tourism industry representatives. The researchers provided the subjects a brief description of the study and requested contact names of persons suitable to be interviewed. As a result, qualitative purposive sampling was utilised to select cases that would be especially informative, and snowball or chain sampling was used when subjects were referred by others (Neuman 2000; Singleton and Straits 1999; Minichiello *et al*. 1995).

Those interviewed included (i) State government officials from the Tasmanian PWS, and Tourism Tasmania; (ii) Local government officials from the West Coast Council; (iii) an interest group representative from the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council (TALC); (iv) Strahan tourism industry representatives; and (v) interpretive designers. A total of eight people were interviewed as listed below:

- Mr Simon Currant: Managing Director, The Strahan Village, Strahan, Tasmania.
- Mr Richard Davey: Managing Director, The Round Earth Company, Tasmania.
- Mr Richard Flanagan: Writer and Interpretive Designer, Hobart, Tasmania.

- Ms Jane Foley: General Manager, Market and Tourist Development, Tourism Tasmania, Tasmania.
- Mr Daryl Gerrity: West Coast Mayor, West Coast Council, Zeehan, Tasmania.
- Ms Susan Haimes: Planner and Project Coordinator (Visitor Centres), Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, Tasmania.
- Mr John Hepper: Tourism Consultant, Inspiring Place, Hobart, Tasmania.
- Mr Gregory Lehman: Planning Officer (Aboriginal), Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, Tasmania.

The information-gathering process was tailored to the respondents in a way that was acceptable to them. The majority of interviews were conducted in person in Strahan and Hobart. When these methods were not practicable, interviews were conducted on a telephone or in writing. Before each interview, the respondents were given an *Information Sheet and Consent Form* describing the nature and purpose of the project. They were then invited to participate in the research. Those who agreed were asked ten to fifteen questions. The interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes. An individual schedule was developed for each interview to ensure the specific expertise and perspective of the informant was elicited. This study explored themes rather than asking a series of set questions, and each interview was designed so that ideas and opinions could be expressed freely (Robinson 1998).

All interviews were recorded on tape or in writing and transcribed. Interview transcripts were then sent to the respondents for verification and revision where necessary. The researchers sought permission to cite material and where personal communications appear in the text, those interviewed have granted permission for their use. However, given the sensitivity of some issues related to the SVC, informants were informed of their right to anonymity. None of the informants asked to remain anonymous.

2.4 Data Analysis

The quantitative aspects of the fieldwork were pre- and post coded. Data coding consisted of labelling the responses to questions in a unique and abbreviated way (using numerical codes) in order to facilitate data entry and manipulation (Neuman 2000; Singleton and Straits 1999). Coding commenced as the visitor survey was developed and precoding of closed questions in particular was completed prior to collecting data. Precoding was tested in the pilot survey and changes were made where necessary. The survey's qualitative, open-ended questions were transcribed verbatim and categorised into key words, themes and concepts. Coding of open-ended questions was undertaken after the survey was completed before data processing.

Analyses of the visitor surveys were undertaken in the field and at the University of Tasmania. Initially, the researchers inspected the completed surveys in the field to ensure that observational data and survey questions had been recorded correctly. The survey data were 'cleaned' using the software package *Survey System Version 7* and data analysis were performed using *SPSS Version 10*. The behavioural mapping, visitor refusal and visitor comment data were entered into *EXCEL 97*. The majority of the survey and observational data utilises measures of frequencies, percentages, and cross tabulations and as a result, the analysis is descriptive. The survey also included data that was classified into distinct categories using ranked, interval and ratio scales. Here, a qualitative approach utilising interpretive analysis was employed to make generalisations and inferences from these results to the overall population (Singleton and Straits 1999; Jacobs 1999).

A thematic analysis of the interview data were undertaken where analytic induction was used to allow for ideas to emerge from the data as it were collected (Minichiello *et al*. 1990). Data coding commenced at the beginning of the fieldwork as the researchers recognised that categorisation of interview data into themes is an 'iterative process' that is repeated frequently during the data collection and analysis phase (Padgett 2000). After completing an interview, the researchers examined the transcripts and extracted the concepts, themes and issues. This preliminary analysis enabled the researchers to focus questions in light of any outcomes and revise

propositions before conducting the next interview (Minichiello *et al*. 1995). Detailed analyses of the interview data were undertaken once the interview process was finalised. A humanistic approach was adopted where 'the extraction of meanings in a process of interpretation' identified each respondent's experiences, intentions, actions and feelings (Robinson 1998:410). Critical interpretation was used where descriptive themes were identified and comparisons were made between interviews, between and across categories. In addition, the respondents were allowed to speak for themselves and verbatim quotations are included in this report.

2.5 Limitations of the Study

Given that researchers must 'evaluate both the adequacy of their reasoning and the actuality of their statements' in terms of the reliability, validity and trustworthiness of their research, the researchers considered the limitations of the study (Singleton and Straits 1999:43). Firstly, the choice of a single case study presents a significant limitation. For example, Platt (1988:18) identifies 'the problematic areas are the representativeness of cases, and the extent to which they provide a challenge to the fit of theory'. Limitations of representativeness can also be extended to intensive qualitative research and although the data may provide causal relationships that are generalisable to other contexts, concrete patterns are unlikely to be representative (Bradshaw and Stratford 2000). Alternatively, extensive quantitative data, in the form of structured surveys and visitor observations, may be representative of the visiting SVC population. However, the results may lack explanatory power, or may not be generalisable to SVC visitors during different seasons or other VC populations (Massey and Meegan 1985).

The researchers were also aware of sampling and non-sampling errors. For example, sampling errors may have occurred in the survey data between the estimate derived from the sample survey and the 'true value' that would be 'obtained if the whole population were enumerated' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1991). In addition, key informants may have been selected inappropriately. Alternatively systematic or random non-sampling errors may have occurred and although random errors would tend to cancel themselves out as they are due to temporary and changing factors, systematic errors may

have significantly biased or distorted results (Singleton and Straits 1999). To ensure reliability, rigour and trustworthiness, the researchers undertook the following:

(a) Triangulation of data through a multi-method approach was undertaken to ensure rigour through verification and multiplication of perspectives.

(b) Professional advice and comments were sought from relevant government departments, private industry and academic bodies when developing the methodology.

(c) All stages of the research were documented to ensure research transparency (research methodology, data collection and data analysis).

(d) The professional market research company Enterprise Marketing assisted in the collection, coding, cleaning and data entry of the survey data. Interviewers strictly adhered to the protocols laid out by the researchers and their assistance helped reduce interviewer bias.

(e) Rigorous checking of all the data was conducted in the field. Enterprise Marketing double-checked the survey data on return to Hobart and it was triple-checked during the analysis phase.

(f) Interview transcripts were verified with respondents to confirm any interpretations made, and verbatim respondent quotations are included in this report to ensure the accuracy of their views.

(g) Research findings were related to the literature and fit within other contexts outside the study situation.

3. DESIGNING EFFECTIVE VISITOR CENTRES

3.1 The Growth of Tourism in Australia

Tourism is defined by the World Tourism Organization and the Australian Bureau of Statistics as travel for more than 40 km and involving at least one stay overnight (but for less than 12 months). Australia has experienced substantial international tourism growth with numbers increasing by 50%, from 2.5 million to 4.9 million between 1992 and 2000 (Tourism Forecasting Council 2001). This trend is expected to continue with arrivals growing at a rate of 7% to reach 9.8 million by 2010. The domestic market is also expected to increase at a rate of 2% from 2000 to 2010 from 249 million to 359 million. However, considerable debate exists as to whether tourism can either be sustained or protect the environment, particularly as consumers are travelling further, staying longer and going to more exotic places (Ryan *et al*. 2000; Moscardo *et al*. 1998; Wall 1997; Ioannides 1995). As a result, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN, World Conservation Union) suggests that tourism should move visitor experiences beyond passive enjoyment to an active role that 'promotes positive environmental ethics and fosters preferred behaviour' (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996:28). These issues are directly relevant to Australia, as tourists are said to be increasingly demanding experiences that are enjoyable, educational, nature-based and environmentally sustainable (Woods and Moscardo 1996). Ecotourism has emerged as one solution and is becoming an important sector in Australia's sustainable tourism industry.[1]

Within the Australian tourism industry, Tasmania has been positioned as a prime ecotourist destination. Tasmania offers unique wilderness experiences and visitors to the island State seek natural places, culture and interactions with people. The State has also experienced increasing visitor numbers with 510 700 tourists visiting Tasmania in 2000 (Tourism Tasmania 2001). Given that over the last decade

[1] The Ecotourism Society (1992:1) has defined ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people'.
Sustainable tourism 'is economically viable but does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment and social fabric of the host community' (Swarbrooke 1999:241).

tourism growth has been estimated at 4% per year and the industry contributes approximately 10% of Gross State Product (Tourism Council Australia 1999), tourism is now vital to the State's economic and social well-being. To meet the demands of Tasmania's growing tourism industry, funding has been allocated for additional VCs.

3.2 Understanding the Audience

According to Poon (1993 in Moscardo 1999) tourists today are more experienced travellers, educated, destination oriented, independent, flexible and environmentally conscious, and in Australia, both domestic and international tourists consider that learning and increasing knowledge are important motivations. In addition, Eagles (1997:10) suggests that visitor satisfaction to remote, environmentally sensitive or tourist areas are closely correlated with 'environmental quality, the adequacy of facilities and programs and the accuracy of expectations'. Consequently, if visitors are increasingly seeking green, educational experiences, then planners and other stakeholders need to provide quality VCs that emphasise environmental protection, communication and interpretation.

Tourists can be broadly classified into demographic type and although age, sex, education and origin provide indications of a visitor's potential needs, demographic information alone may not be sufficient when designing VCs. Smith (1978 in Pearce *et al*. 1991) argues that visitors can also be categorised into tourist type (from the rarely seen explorer through to the incipient mass charter arrivals) and that as tourist groups increase in size, their impact on communities steadily increases.

Evans (1999), Faggetter (1996) and Hanna (1995) argue that tourists are not homogeneous and they arrive with their values, interests, motivations and concerns that are shaped by previous life experiences. Stewart *et al*. (1998) agree, and add that tourists can be further categorised into seekers, stumblers, shadowers and shunners, with those most likely to absorb new information falling into the stumblers/satisfied category. Thus, there are many types of tourists and it is important to correctly identify the audience, as people seek out experiences and learn new information differently (Hall and McArthur 1998; Christensen 1994). Therefore, if planners are to

design effectively VCs and select services and interpretation, the first step is identifying the audience and accepting that every tourist is different. By understanding the audience, planners are more likely to identify those traits common to each group. According to these authors, this approach ensures that services and environmentally focused interpretation are targeted to meet visitor needs. This in turn helps planners fulfil their objectives in relation to the VC's management and operation, and in achieving positive visitor experiences where individuals are open to new information. However, it can be argued that this approach is theoretically impoverished, because discretely categorising people into groups subjectively homogenises them regardless of their individual qualities or motivations. In addition, classification of tourists assumes that knowledge is acquired and assimilated immediately.

3.3 The Role of Visitor Centres

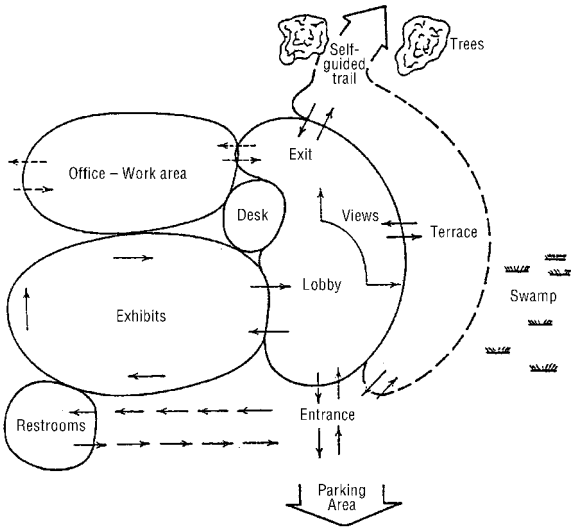
Given the increasing role of VCs in Australian tourism, stakeholders must critically assess whether they are effective management tools in providing information, regulating increasing visitor numbers and reducing tourism related environmental impact. Thus, to ensure that VCs are sustainable and effective Beckmann (1991) argues for: fully integrating VC design with interpretive media to ensure that design precedes development; and recognising that VCs are a part of a comprehensive interpretive strategy that incorporates realistic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

3.3.1 Diversity and function

VCs are diverse and they serve to varying degrees a multiplicity of functions. They may be visitor, orientation, information, tourism, interpretive, nature, cultural, discovery, and adventure centres, or even park museums and ranger stations (Moscardo 1993; Benson and Baird 1979). However, as their primary function is to serve people, then VC is an appropriate term. Sugden and Saunders (1991) state that VCs can be grandiose, like that of the Cardwell Information Centre at Queensland's gateway to the tropics. Alternatively, centres can be small like the tent that was utilised at Mon Repos Environmental Park in Queensland during the turtle nesting season (prior to the construction of a permanent facility) (Office of National

Tourism 1996; Harmon-Price 1991). In addition, VCs show marked diversity in site location, landscaping, architectural sympathy with their context and quality, as exemplified by the South Australian Seal Bay Visitor Centre that is designed and constructed for low environmental impact on sand dunes (Office of National Tourism 1996; Pearce 1991). However, although VCs often include a number of elements in their design and each VC has its own unique characteristics, they generally have a basic structure (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 The basic elements of many visitor centres.



Source: Malbon 1976:353

Moscardo (1993; 1998; 1999), Wylde (1996), Pearce (1991) and Sugden and Saunders (1991) identify four primary functions of VCs as follows.

1 **Marketing and access** – this traditional role of information centres actively promotes an area or product. It involves selling what to do in areas, conveying how to get there and suggesting where to stay. This function is often dominant in New Zealand and British Information Centres where advance accommodation booking and souvenir sales are key elements.

2 **Enhancement and information** – this traditional role of interpretation centres focuses on improving the quality of the visitor experience and appreciation process. For example, the Cardwell Visitor Centre located mid-way between Townsville and Cairns, Queensland introduces visitors to the Wet Tropics and the recreational opportunities of the area.

3 **Control and filtering** – this policing and directing function helps reduce visitor pressure on resources. VC location can physically concentrate visitors away from fragile sites, and messages can help shape visitors' attitudes toward more environmentally sensitive tourist activity. By highlighting park management, undesirable behaviour can be reduced as staff can establish resource stewardship. These centres include the VC at Phillip Island, Victoria and the Skyrail Rainforest Cableway Interpretation Centre in North Eastern Australia's WHA.

4 **Substitution** – VCs can be a substitute for the attraction itself and may include those where the resource is vulnerable and/or inaccessible or is scattered and difficult to appreciate in its component parts (for example, Aboriginal cultural heritage, wilderness, and marine, desert or Antarctic environments). These centres may be attractions in their own right and they may charge fees and have a strong commercial flavour. The balance of these functions varies and many visitors see nothing of the actual resource itself – for example, Antarctic Adventure, Tasmania.

Public relations is an additional function suggested by Absher (1997) and Turner (1991:156) who state that VCs should improve a government's image and convince visitors that an agency 'is doing a good job at managing an area'. In Tasmania, the Forest and Heritage Trail Visitor Centre is marketed as the gateway to the Southern Forests and this enhancement and information centre has a strong commercial flavour. In addition, it conveys an understanding about Tasmania's forests and how they are managed.

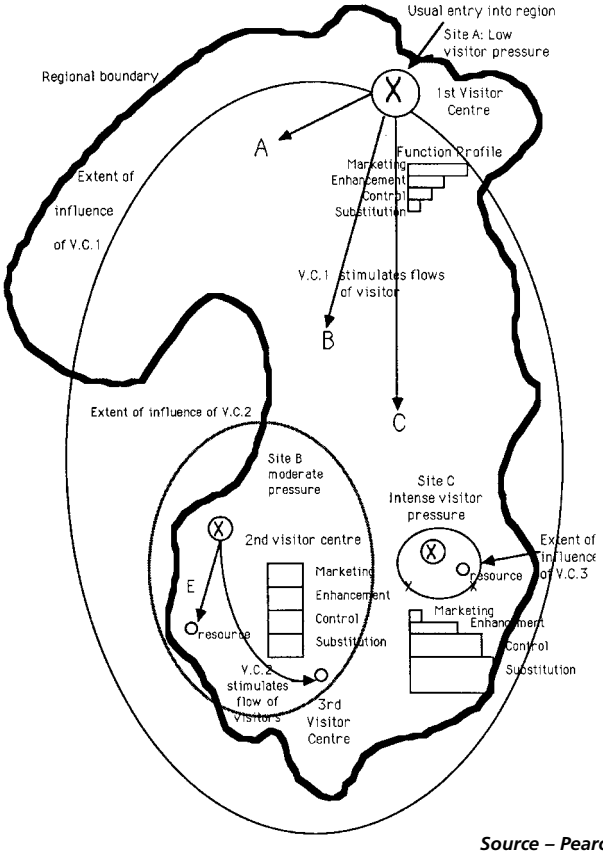
Although VCs have primary functions, many centres include additional elements depending upon the circumstance. For example, the Cradle Mountain Visitor Centre in the TWWHA provides an interpretive substitute wilderness experience. In addition, it markets

the region, provides a reservation service for the Waldheim Huts, and a means by which management can impart conservation messages and control visitor pressure on the surrounding environment. Alternatively, Canada's WHA Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump presents the viewpoints of both the indigenous peoples and European archaeological science, in addition to providing a substitute prehistoric buffalo hunt experience, souvenirs and a booking service (National Park Service 2000a).

3.3.2 Designing a complete strategy

Black and Mackay (1995) and the Department of Conservation and Land Management ([CALM] 1988) argue that strategic and staged planning of VCs and interpretation strategies is required at the regional (ecosystem) level if the centre's are to be considered within a more holistic framework. A hypothetical example of regional planning is detailed in Figure 3.2, and here the first centre is the critical access point where management has an opportunity to reach a wide target audience, service visitor needs and market the region. Visitors from this centre are then guided and filtered towards other more remote centres where the resource is under greater pressure. An increasingly substitutive experience is provided to ensure that environmental impacts are minimised. This approach, even if only partially adopted in Australia, would help improve the visitors' experience, and management objectives may be achieved more readily as messages could be coordinated, complementary, cost efficient and consistent.

Figure 3.2 Regional planning of visitor centres.



Source – Pearce 1991:14

Regional planning is not widely used in Australia or overseas, although the Yellowstone National Park, USA offers a partial example. Eight centres are located strategically throughout Yellowstone and, in addition to providing a layered system of information and orientation, they provide interpretive programs tailored to 'each of the park's countries' (sic) (National Park Service 2000b). These centres are divided into: satellite centres located in communities close to the park; gateway centres located at park entrances; and in-park centres (National Park Service 2000b).

Alternatively, Molloy (1992) describes the New Zealand experience in formulating a national interpretation plan (at the regional level) where VCs are now more integrated with live interpretation during summer visitor programs, information provided at remote field huts, heritage highways and activity sites. However, Molloy (1992) suggests that problems may arise when interpretation 'units' cross administrative or state boundaries. For example, Black and Mackay (1995:62) describe the development of an interpretation strategy for the Australian Alps as a single unit where 'cross-border administrative arrangements' and collaboration between agencies was required. Thus, cooperation between agencies, the tourism industry, local communities and state governments is required in Australia if an integrated and regional approach to VC and interpretive planning is to be successful.

Considering that VCs are expensive, long-term projects, Pearce (1991) argues the importance of linking VC growth and function to the growth of tourism and planning strategies. However, the decision to construct a VC is often influenced by political and administrative agendas as well as educational criteria (Hall and McArthur 1998; Hockings and Moscardo 1991). For example, Tatnell (1991) points out that the Namadgi National Park Visitor Centre near Canberra was built to orientate visitors to the park and provide educational information. However, due to a bureaucratic compromise between government agencies and not an interpretation plan, this centre was not sited in the park, but on the main road tourist route out from Canberra.[2] However, the VC's siting compromised the Centre's capacity to orientate visitors to the park or provide an intimate park experience and as a result, the park boundary was moved nearer to the Centre. Consequently, implementing planning advice at the site-specific and regional levels is important if VCs are to be effective and sustainable.

3.3.3 The Tasmanian experience

The TWWHA covers over 20% of Tasmania and, as such, this landscape sets it apart from the other Australian States and Territories. It is also an important element of this island's image as a tourist

[2] A new and additional VC based on sustainable building practice, the Tidbinbilla Visitor Centre, has recently opened at the gateway of the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, which is adjacent to the Namadgi National Park.

destination (Tourism Tasmania 2000). In an effort to promote, manage and protect the WHA and other equally unique Tasmanian environments, VCs are becoming popular and many new centres are proposed. Sugden and Saunders (1991) explain that in Tasmania, VCs and interpretive services have been provided largely on a park-to-park basis, and now planning at the regional scale is being undertaken. Fortunately, Tasmanian's have the opportunity to take a holistic approach when planning new VCs as the State does not generally need to cope with the legacy of numerous, older ad hoc facilities, because it has not had the resources to build them.

Today, the TWWHA is treated as a single unit or region, where the TPWS's overall objective, as defined under the World Heritage Convention, is 'to identify, protect, conserve, present and, where appropriate, rehabilitate the world heritage area and other natural and cultural values of the WHA and to transmit that heritage to future generations in as good or better condition than present' (Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service [TPWS] 2000:3). Despite the worthy intentions of this plan, it must be questioned if it is possible to achieve a 'better condition' than the present one, what elements may contribute to a 'better condition', or which particular view of a 'better condition' is the most appropriate.

Notwithstanding the debate regarding environmental condition, the *Tasmanian WHA Interpretation Strategy* was developed in 1990 to help achieve the TPWS's overall objective for the TWWHA. This report identifies that interpretation of the TWWHA for tourists are important, as Tasmania's natural beauty, wilderness and wildlife, along with history and cultural heritage are the strength of the State's tourism product (Saunders 1990). The strategy outlines a five-year vision and it was developed concurrently with the *TWWHA Management Plan*. As such, it recommends that VCs be built as part of an overall, holistic and theme-based strategy. Although this strategy is now out-dated, it continues to be the definitive document as no other strategy provides clear interpretive directions. A second *Interpretive Strategy for Tasmania's Parks, Reserves and Historic Sites*, was commissioned by the TPWS in 1992, however, this document has not been implemented because it is confusing and convoluted (Winkworth *et al*. 1994). Despite this report's shortfalls, it identified that the government needs to reach a wider audience than only those

gaining access to the TWWHA. As such, it argues that interpretation becomes the underlying commitment for the whole Service and that non-WHA areas be afforded the same care and resources as the TWWHA. Together, these strategies refer directly to the *TWWHA Management Plan*. As such, VCs have been built in Visitor Service Zones within the TWWHA, and on the edge of the area to complement, rather than conflict or compete with the environment or each other (TPWS 2000).

The TFC and the TVIN have also constructed VCs outside the TWWHA (Cubit 1991; Tasmanian Visitor Information Network [TVIN] 1999). These centres partially fulfil the regional planning model, as visitors are either directed into Tasmanian forests, or they are offered information and tourist services by the TVIN at strategically located centres. However, they do not necessarily provide an avenue to impart management messages or control visitors to the same degree as those supported by the TPWS, as governmental departments with a business focus operate them, under MOUs, concessionaire agreements or as commercial operations. Although *The Tasmanian Attractions Study* (Tourism Solutions and Inspiring Place 1999) provides a strategic framework by which the tourism industry and government can work together to better present Tasmania's attractions, (including TFC, TVIN and TPWS VCs), agencies may also need to develop a comprehensive interpretation strategy with a broad cross-agency view. This strategy should be aligned with *The Tasmanian Attractions Study* to ensure that VC services are targeted appropriately, and interpretation and education activities are aligned with management objectives. Considering the importance of Tasmanian tourism, this approach may provide integrated quality VC experiences between centres, and distinctive regional products that are viable, different and interesting.

3.4 Designing for Distinctiveness

3.4.1 Planning and design

Grenier *et al*. (1993) argue that planners and architects are important in the delivery of sustainable tourism and ecotourism goals and VCs that reflect public attitudes, expectations and consciousness. If VCs are planned and constructed in a considered and sequential manner,

each facility may encompass a greater number of essential elements (Table 3.1). In particular, community and indigenous consultation, and the design and operation of facilities in a relatively honest and ethical manner were not specifically highlighted. Therefore, VC design elements need to be compiled first into a single set of criterion, and then incorporated into an overall strategy that includes community and indigenous consultation. Planners and architects should consider elements that offer unique and ethical solutions, sustainability, environmental sensitivity, distinctive and site-specific design, variety, functionality, access to all, safety and flexibility. In addition, Harmon-Price (1991) states that in the past, a standard building design was adopted to overcome delays associated with site specific design. This approach had drawbacks as it did not reflect each area's character, community or climate, and VCs tended to be more of an office than a place to inspire visitors. Finally, Pearce (1991:140) suggests that distinctive design welcomes visitors and assists their 'sense of place', promotes awareness of local environments and encourages exploration (when confronted with novelty and the unexpected, people become mindful and curious). Pearce (1991) argues that new facilities are well received when they offer: distinctive experiences of a setting/landscape which are subtle or imposing; excellent design and synergy of the building with its environment; imaginative experiences extending beyond the centre; and variety and distinctive experiences within and between VCs where synergy is achieved through mixing substitution, marketing, enhancement and control.

Table 3.1 Planning and design elements of visitor centres

DESIGN CRITERIA	DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS
Is the VC required?	VCs are costly to build, staff, outfit and maintain – question if the VC is required.
Analyse the problem first	Do not preconceive your solution before analysing the problem and do not decide on your media before establishing the program objectives.
Incorporate the VC into the entire strategy	A VC should be a part of a multi-disciplinary framework. It should not be the program, but a catalyst – not a place to begin or end your program. Ensure the facility is out-turned rather than in-turned.
Involve communities	The involvement and co-operation of the local and/or indigenous community is important if interpretation is to be inclusive, authentic and truly sustainable.

DESIGN CRITERIA	DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS
Plan and design the entire program together	Plan and design the program before development begins orbefore modifying an existing program. Clearly identify site and audience characteristics, and the themes and stories to be told. Vital in terms of planning and budgeting (i.e. staff resources).
Choose unique solutions	Whilst considering the VC within an overall strategy do not assume that a solution effective at one location will work at another. Analyse the site-specific problems.
Consult	Consult with qualified and experienced people. Appropriate consultants will bring knowledge, depth and innovative solutions to the program.
Use a team	Include within the team an architect, a programmer, a planner and a designer.
Develop goals	Determine if the VC is to meet cost recovery objectives or interpretive objectives.
Choose the site carefully	Correct location is essential, as the site will create a sense of place, harmonise with the environment and help determine the programs' evolution and direction.
Construct an environmentally sensitive facility	Build VCs with minimum environmental impact and proper concern for using materials that reflect the surroundings and/or eliminates day-to-day maintenance. Buildings should use recycled materials and low quantities of water and electricity.
Look to the future	Include elements that have a long life but which do not cost a lot to maintain.
Carefully plan the VC	The inside space, its size, the location of displays and the flow pattern between each is critical to the success of the VC. Design for multiple uses and flexibility (an outside theatre and adjustable, updateable displays).
Use variety	Use interactive exhibits and static displays. Consider dioramas, murals, a children's corner, a transition area and a place to relax, read and reflect on the VC.
Construct a functional facility	Do not build monuments that reflect only the designers or architects needs. Build for people including children, as parents are more likely to take an interest in the VC and the conservation messages of the centre appeals to all ages. Ensure shelter and comfort; contact with management staff; interpretive support services areas; and non-interpretive support services including toilets and administration areas.
Go back to basics	Interpretation can be inexpensive, as visitors often seek low-tech experiences.

DESIGN CRITERIA	DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS
Provide welcome	Ensure the VC welcomes, orientates and encapsulating the spirit of the place.
Reduce visitor fatigue	Reduce visitor fatigue by adding seating; reducing stimulus overload; providing information free spaces; accommodating different learning styles/abilities; using efficient and creative communication; and using 'conceptual advance organisers'.
Be safety, security and access conscious	Provide facilities and information to encourage safety and comfort. Vandalism, security and access can be reduced through good design. Parking should be adequate and easily accessed from the VC.
Determine and confirm resources	Ensure that resources are available not only for construction, but also for operation, maintenance and the delivery of interpretive programs. Inadequate resources ultimately results in an unsustainable centre, frustrated operators, lack of management support and funding, and an under-utilised VC of poor standard.
Service provision	Respect and consideration is important – for visitors, the community and VC staff.
Ensure adequate publicity	VCs must be well signposted and adequately publicised (i.e. visitors should know that the VC is sustainably designed and operated). VCs should open at times to meet the visitor's needs.

Adapted from many sources including - Moscardo 1993, 1998; Eagles 1997; Nephin Consulting Partners 1997; Payne and Dimanche 1996; Screven 1996; Department of Tourism 1995; Christensen 1994; Pearce 1991; Harmon-Price 1991; Turner 1991; Beckmann 1990; Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) 1988; Peart 1986; Benson and Baird 1979; Beazley 1969 in Beckmann 1991

3.4.2 Location

According to Ballantyne and Uzzell (1999), planners must consider VC location because the siting and appearance of a facility is essential to its success. Planners should assess if the VC is for visitors, management, planners, the wider community or the environment. Beazley (1969 in Beckmann 1991) argues that VCs should be played down visually if they are not to compete with the features they seek to interpret. Benson and Baird (1979) provide an alternative view and suggest that although site selection needs to be sensitive, the VC should command a dominant location to entice visitors. For example, the original VC at the Royal National Park (NSW) was designed to intrude minimally both visually and physically (Beckmann 1991). However, according to Beckmann, the facility was not used as it was

sited away from where visitors congregated and a new, more centrally positioned VC was built. Despite the Centre's relocation to the park's entrance, it may still not adequately service visitors as they may bypass the facility when going to desirable locations. Conversely, states Beckmann (1991), the British Sherwood Forest Visitor Centre was built as a substitute experience to relieve pressure on the region's most important interpretive feature, Major Oak. However, the VC resulted in visitor impacts to the area significantly increasing. As a result, the specific circumstances of each VC should be assessed before, during and after a decision on its location is made. However, Australia VCs are often located at the periphery of national parks or cultural sites, and although management messages and interpretation are contained within the facilities, the natural or heritage area itself may have none. Consequently, poor interaction between the visitor and the environment may occur, which in turn may reduce the quality of visitor experiences and understanding.

3.5 Planning Effective Interpretation

3.5.1 Managing tourism in sensitive areas

Planners have traditionally used three main techniques to manage visitors in tourist areas (Orams 1996; Sugden and Saunders 1991; Dutton 1991). These are as follows.

- **Physical controls** – to separate tourists from environmentally sensitive areas and influence behaviour (i.e., barriers, paths, boardwalks, zoning).

- **Direct controls** – imposed or enforced, to prohibit or restrict detrimental behaviour (i.e., rules, regulations, permits and charges).

- **Indirect mechanisms** – the reduction of inappropriate behaviour voluntarily through interpretation (i.e., interpretation within a VC).

Interpretation has largely arisen in response to these tourism needs and it is becoming increasingly used as an important intervention strategy for reaching visitors with potentially influential messages (Moscardo 1998; Absher 1997; Wolfe 1997; Veverka 1997; Ham and

Krumpe 1996). This may be with the intention of enhancing recreational experiences and public relations, or to provide information and booking services. However, planners may also wish to inform, modify or replace problematic behaviours when interpreting sensitive topics or environmentally sensitive areas. To this end, VC interpretation can help reduce the need for regulation and enforcement, increase awareness of appropriate behaviour and enable careful distribution of visitor pressure on environments. Thus, VC interpretation can improve the quality of visitor interactions and overall experience by encouraging them to understand the host region, and an area's natural and cultural values. However, achieving this potential and imparting management messages requires quality interpretation that keeps visitors as the central focus in a respectful and intelligent way, and a match between visitor wants and what the destination has to offer. Thus, argues Moscardo (1998:154), if VC interpretation is to be improved it is critical to 'better understand what visitors already know, need to know and want to know'.

3.5.2 What is interpretation?

Orams (1996) states that interpretation is traditionally used to describe the translation of meaning from one spoken language to another. For remote and environmentally sensitive areas the definition is similar, and interpretation in this context was given meaning by Freeman Tilden in 1957. He defined interpretation as 'an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information' (Tilden 1957:9).

At that time, Tilden (1957 in Evans 2000; CALM 1988) proposed that interpretation needs to evoke an emotional response and it should be relevant, revealing, creative, provocative, holistic and focussed. Many definitions have been outlined since and although they often have a differing focus, the essential elements of interpretation are similar. Interpretation is about communication and education (Moscardo 1999; Absher 1997; Cheatley 1994). It is the process of explaining place significance to visitors, providing enjoyable and meaningful experiences; promoting understanding, empathising with or appreciating subjects; or imparting management objectives (Stewart

et al. 1998; Moscardo *et al*. 1998; Absher 1997; Nephin Consulting Partners 1997; Aldridge 1988). CALM (1988:1.1) refines this definition and describes interpretation as 'the craft of enriching visitor experience' in an educational and entertaining way (it is an interactive process involving the visitor, medium and resource). Knapp (1997:19) adds that interpretation should also have impact on a visitor's point of view and sometimes behaviour, with respect to protecting environmental values, to fulfil the 'aspirations of conservationists as well as to act as a major force for the social, economic, political and cultural good'. Thus, VC interpretation is about experience and the persuasive communication of ideas and feelings that help visitors enrich their understanding and appreciation of their world, and their roles within it – in an effort to foster positive visitor values and behaviour for the area. Interpretation is also an art that is derived from a range of disciplines and its success depends on how well it communicates.

3.5.3 Social change

Although interpretation's mission and core definition has remained stable, its character has changed significantly to reflect changes in audiences and society (Ballantyne and Uzzell 1999; Absher 1997). Reductions in funding, suggests Vander Stoep (1988:29), 'underlie many of the other trends', particularly as to who provides the services. In Britain, North America and New Zealand many VCs now result from the joint efforts of the tourist industry, conservation organisations and regional and local governments (Radford 1991; Atkinson 1991). In Australia, these groups rarely met in the past, and today cooperation is more widespread and consultants or concessionaire agreements are more common as private management is becoming preferred to that of public control. Although industry may deliver services more efficiently, and economic rationalism increasingly dictates that the user pays, Atkinson (1991) states this exercise can be self-defeating because when charges are applied visitor numbers drop off. This cost recovery approach fails to recognise that without gaining access to information the potential visitor/consumer will not know what is available. In addition, consultants or concessionaire agreements are relatively new in Australia and it remains to be seen if this VC management approach is desirable or economically viable, or if it can address wider regional considerations, government agency objectives,

environmental and cultural sensitivities, or community equity and their concerns.

Vander Stoep (1988) considers the expansion of interpretation's role with changing audiences due to global demographic change. Populations are aging, and older adults with discretionary time and money are participating in tourism. Visitors today are eager to learn and participate, and planners need to break away from traditional programs and techniques to meet these demands. Non-personal interpretation is becoming increasingly popular to offset resource constraints and staff reductions. Moscardo (1989) adds that interpretation is also becoming high-tech and there is an increase of demonstrations, drama, storytelling, special events and living history in an effort to meet the expectations of a highly stimulated, computer literate population. In light of these shifts, planners need to take an 'ethical lead'. They need to include stakeholders, share resources, become more accountable and tackle traditionally hands-off controversial issues with confidence. Considering that people are increasingly taking their information from public culture, it is also important that planners help visitors discover and understand the intrinsic and authentic qualities of an area's heritage – its place, past, present and future. This ultimately helps visitors understand themselves and their own place within the environment.

3.5.4 Community and social capital

Cox (1995:18) defines social capital as 'the social glue that gives cohesion to our society'. She argues that trust and goodwill are needed to provide supportive places for discussing new ideas, dissident views, debates and criticism. Issues of social capital arise when planning VCs, and Pearce *et al*. (1991:147) consider the social consequences of tourism where developments or activities impact 'on the lives of those in the community'. Taylor (1995:487) suggests that communities should be involved in decision making to ensure that planning 'becomes a part of the social consciousness of the destination'. Ballantyne and Uzzell (1999:65) agree, and argue that stakeholders should be incorporated into VC planning processes to ensure the purpose, themes, stories, messages, and techniques of 'presentation are negotiated with, rather than imposed upon, the community'. Ballantyne *et al*. (1998:15) add that although interpretive

decision making is 'currently based mostly on internal information', such as site staff and experts, other groups should be included, particularly the tourists themselves. McArthur and Hall (1993:241) concur, and suggest that conservation does not necessarily lie in the physical resource itself 'but in the interaction of people and the resource'. Thus, it is members of the community and visitors who inherently own the natural and cultural heritage interpreted. As a result, VCs must consider the changing and dynamic views of these groups, as well as the needs of day-to-day managers. Consequently, if VCs are to be sustainable, the local community and visitors are important players in the planning and operation of these facilities.

Murphy (1985:151) suggests that community involvement in tourism planning can result in a shared vision and 'that by focusing on the community's heritage and culture in the development of the tourism product destination distinctiveness can be created'. In addition, community members can help elucidate issues when incremental management alterations lead to a loss of meaning or when management is in conflict with stakeholders (Saunders 1993). Community involvement is also beneficial when VCs are planned to generate economic development in declining or undeveloped areas, or when sensitive environmental or social issues are presented (Ballantyne and Uzzell 1999). In addition, community participation and the recognition of an area's social capital by agencies, helps to achieve sustainable tourism and a sense of place (Trotter 1999).

In Australia, it has been demonstrated that community participation in designing, managing and operating VCs and interpretation can be successful, although these groups are often unacknowledged or not consulted. Uluru National Park provides an example of community participation and the park is successfully administered by a Board of Management (including the traditional Indigenous owners, government officials and scientists) to ensure that tourism activities are sustainable and culturally viable (Wells 1993). In addition, Flanagan (1996) recalls the conflict confronting the design team during the construction and operation of the SVC, Tasmania. Flanagan (1996:181) sought not to repeat old myths, but to provoke and challenge 'visitors to rethink all they would normally take for granted'. In an effort to create connections between the past and present, and to bring together juxtapositions in ideology, the design

team worked collaboratively with local European and Aboriginal communities to successfully tackle the controversial issues of Tasmania's south west head-on. Flanagan states that people's stories were presented in an 'authentic', honourable and liberating way, and despite the Tasmanian government's resistance to the Centre's opening as its contents was considered subversive, it has become an attraction in its own right. Thus, if new ideas and concepts are to be successfully presented in VCs, these facilities need to foster trust and support for local community members and visitors. These arguments propose that active public participation ensures that interpretation is not planned in isolation from the people who own it or those who come to experience it. In addition, public participation helps to present an 'authentic', in-depth and layered interpretive experience – where local residents gain a sense of pride and respect, and tourists gain a deeper appreciation for the area's uniqueness. However, difficulties arise when deciding on which community vision to present, or when defining authentic interpretation, as these are subjective terms that have different meanings and outcomes depending on the perspective taken. Consequently, care should be taken when pushing forward any one community vision or authentic view.

3.5.5 Cultural issues

Ballantyne and Uzzell (1999:63) explain the dilemma that planners face when interpreting Australia's culture, because it is 'difficult to find commonalities on a national scale' as our heritage is complicated by the policy of multiculturalism. In addition Pearce (1991) identifies two areas of concern in planning cross-cultural aspects of VCs, particularly indigenous groups and providing access for visitors from other cultures. When interpreting indigenous culture, Ballantyne (1995) considers the problem of interpreting controversial issues, for example Aboriginal peoples' cultural history. Ballantyne (1995:16) suggests using a 'hot interpretation approach' where Aboriginal peoples' culture/heritage is reflected as an 'ongoing evolving entity'. Hot interpretation, suggests Uzzell and Ballantyne (1998:154), 'appreciates the need for and injects an affective component into its subject matter' when presenting issues that involve personal values, beliefs and memories. That is, it accepts that an individual's feelings, emotional instincts and memories play an important decision making role, and interpretation that has the potential to arouse that

emotional response should be presented 'authentically' to recognise and reflect controversial issues. Uzzell and Ballantyne (1998) argue that a hot interpretation adequately conveys meaning, and can be used pro-actively and politically to foster community development. For example, the interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people during their initial contact and subsequent European settlement (or conquest depending upon your view) should be depicted to foster cultural pride and promote reconciliation by allowing different groups to 'acknowledge and appreciate the interconnectedness of their history' (Ballantyne 1995:16; James 1999). However, Ballantyne and Uzzell (1993) point out, in their description of the problems and successes encountered by those interpreting apartheid in District Six Cape Town, that reconciliation should not allow one group to interpret the history of another as cultural appropriation results in conflict. They stress that if reconciliation is to be fostered all groups must work together. By encouraging community collaboration, interpretation not only fulfils the aspirations of communities or one cultural group, it also facilitates historical truth, alternative futures and social, economic, political and cultural good.

James (1999) states that interpretation should not only be authentic, but it should be undertaken by indigenous people to ensure they own what it represents. For example, Bates (1992) presents an Aboriginal communities perspective and he recalls the problems arising at the Australian Mootwingee National Park Cultural Centre, when the National PWS failed to consult with indigenous people. This centre was inappropriately sited 400 m from the area's main engraving site, and the consultant neither interpreted the site adequately nor finished the displays. Bates (1992) questions why funding is available to catalogue and date Indigenous aboriginal culture but not to record their knowledge. He suggests that Indigenous aboriginal land management not only ensures that agencies consider Aboriginal culture first, but it results in providing spiritually sensitive interpretation that is effective and resource efficient. Thus, inviting Aboriginal communities to design and manage their own interpretation helps bridge cultural gaps, and fosters reconciliation and cross-cultural understanding. A sensitive, balanced and honest consultative approach is required when presenting and managing controversial experiences.

Generally, the literature provides little information to guide those seeking to interpret tragic or controversial events, as is exemplified by the difficulties of interpreting 'real life' hot issues at the Port Arthur Historic Site, Tasmania. Evans (1996:15) recalls the 1996 massacre at Port Arthur, and she states that tourists now visit the site to peruse the area's history as well as 'to see for themselves where the terrible events actually happened'. In light of this event, interpreters reflected upon their interpretation and debated if they should include the tragedy in a new VC. Evans examines how much time needs to elapse between a tragic event and its interpretation, given that the traditional aims of interpretation includes provocation and the stimulation of emotions. This author asks many questions and provides few answers. However, Evans suggests that real life tragic interpretation either waits for a new generation, or be non-obtrusive, non-sensational, empathetic and respectful of those directly effected.

3.6 Interpretation as a Planning Strategy

The literature identifies interpretation as an effective and desirable management tool that can play a critical role in achieving sustainability (Moscardo 1999; Moscardo *et al*. 1998; Hall and McArthur 1998; Beckmann 1987, 1988; Veverka 1997; Christensen 1990). However, sustainability is a complex issue and debate exists as to whether VCs should be environmentally, socially, culturally, spiritually or economically sustainable. Today, interpretation is being increasingly aligned with cost recovery imperatives and VC economic viability is becoming as, or more, important than social and cultural capital. For example, Woods and Moscardo (1996) suggest the use of innovative and appropriate interpretation within centres not only helps manage tourism impact in remote, environmentally sensitive and tourist areas – it's good business. This is because when values, issues, stories and messages are imparted successfully to the visitor, their appreciation of an area and tourist experience is enhanced. This outcome can help foster environmental conservation, respect for local people, tourists as ambassadors, word of mouth referral and potentially more tourists. For example, in their study of the Skyrail Rainforest Cableway in Cairns, Woods and Moscardo (1996b:111) identify that overall; 'interpretation does influence satisfaction'. They found that tourists who went on an interpretive walk, went into the VC and/or talked to a ranger were more satisfied than those who did

not. Considering Skyrail is a commercial ecotourism venture, interpretation makes good economic sense as it encourages satisfied visitors. In this example, tourism has a positive impact on the VC because large numbers of mainstream tourists are able to access the rainforest and learn about the environment. However, despite the benefits tourism and VCs provide each other, planners should ensure that these facilities not only contribute to an operation's revenue base, but also to an area's environmental, social, cultural and spiritual sustainability.

Evans (2000:10) suggests that interpretation is 'value-adding to that object or place' and hence it is a product or service. Given that interpretation is either funded by public money or industry, it should be made accountable by setting transparent and achievable objectives. However, Hill (1992:38) points out that interpretive planning is often ad hoc or not conducted systematically. Ballantyne and Uzzell (1999) and Dutton (1991) agree, and they support the development of relevant objectives, processes and guidelines, a recognisable interpretive discipline, management training in interpretation, and dispelling the 'soft area myth'. These authors point out that interpretation was viewed as the poor cousin of environmental education, and they suggest the discipline be valued and respected as an important profession, and a non-formal education strategy. Today, interpretive standards, and the interpreter's skills and professionalism have improved, and interpretation is increasingly seen as environmental education's partner. As such, it has the potential to take an environmental lead, to present new concepts in challenging ways and foster global citizenship. However, effective interpretation can be delivered by any skilled communicator regardless of professional standing and thus, balance needs to be found between interpretive professionalism and the intrinsic ability of 'uneducated' interpreters.

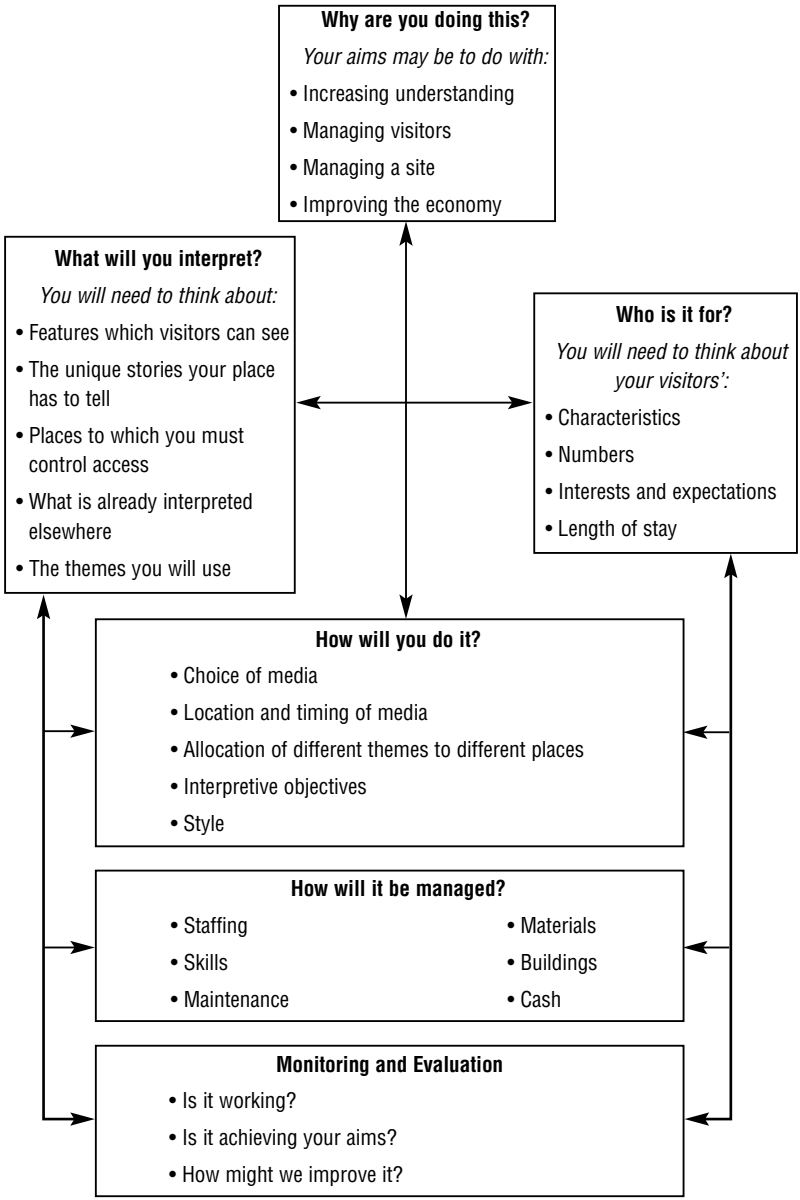
Another interpretive limitation as an important educational, cultural, political, and intellectual experience is that interpretation is rarely integrated into an overall plan and linkages that do exist may be inadequate, inappropriate or indistinguishable from other activities. To overcome these difficulties, members of the Scottish Tourism Initiative undertook a three-year project to develop the Highland Interpretive Strategy (Carter 1997). This strategy recommends developing

strategic plans at the regional level with clear aims and objectives, detailed plans at the area or local level to identify work programs, and site specific plans for specific places. The strategy suggests considering:

- who the visitors are and why do interpreters want to communicate with them;
- what to communicate and what are the site values;
- what other interpretation is occurring; and
- where and how communication is to be achieved?

According to Evans (2000), these guidelines provide a framework to assess interpretation, why it is being proposed and whether the themes suggested are appropriate and easily understood. In addition, the guidelines help determine who the audience is, what they need to know, what activities they may undertake, how interpretation complements other existing interpretation, the development of appropriate media components, evaluation and where necessary, display alteration. Consequently, interpretation is about balancing different issues and Figure 3.3 details the interpretive planning process and its potential feedback loop as identified by the Scottish Tourism Initiative. Although this process includes most planning elements, community consultation and participation is absent in the structure.

Figure 3.3 Major issues pertaining to the interpretive planning process.



Source – Carter 1997:11

In remote or environmentally sensitive areas, conserving resources and providing enriching visitor experiences are often the 'largest and most conspicuous management tasks', and often, interpretation is a minor activity in terms of resources despite its core function (VDNRE 1999:ix). In addition, society's shift toward economic rationalism has impacted how agencies manage these areas with significant implications for interpretation (Ballantyne and Uzzell 1999). In response to these changes, the Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council (ANZECC) Working Group on National Parks and Protected Area Management commissioned a report on best practice interpretation, benchmarking and education (VDNRE 1999; Armstrong and Enting 1999). This report identified that no Australian government agency had developed an adequate system to 'align interpretation and education activities with corporate objectives', developed programs methodically, or evaluated critical success factors (VDNRE 1999:v). As a result, the project developed the Model for Park Interpretation and Education that integrates five key stages with other existing business systems. However, the report's structure is complicated, it presents broad concepts rather than clear and practical directions and it fails to recognise the innate environmental, cultural, social or spiritual benefits an effective and truly sustainable VC or interpretive element can bring to an area.

3.7 Integrating Visitor Centre Design with Interpretive Planning

This review has established that Australian VCs provide tourist services and they orientate, entertain and educate visitors. Consequently, Moscardo (1991:85) suggests visitors must 'play a central role in whatever it is that goes on' in VCs. As a result, if stakeholders are to meet visitor needs and provide sustainable and effective VCs, they need to consider that visitors are increasingly seeking a green and environmentally friendly product. In addition, stakeholders need to act upon the sustainable tourism principles set out internationally by the IUCN and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and nationally in the Australian Government's ecologically sustainable development (ESD) Working Group Report for Tourism and the *National Ecotourism Strategy* (ICOMOS 2000; ESD Working Group 1991; Commonwealth Department of Tourism 1994). In addition, planners also need to integrate environmental, social,

cultural, spiritual and economic sustainability success factors into a centre's structure if it is to be truly sustainable.

Initially, planners must consider if VCs are the most appropriate tools to convey information to visitors. If the need is established, planners must then understand who the visitors are, what their expectations might be, and how they react to the kinds of experiences provided. In addition, if VCs are to be sustainable they should also be planned systematically, to ensure they are incorporated into a comprehensive interpretation strategy that includes clear and practical objectives, processes, guidelines and evaluation. This strategy should also complement other relevant plans to ensure overall VC viability. However, many VC success factors identified in the literature are rhetorical statements rather than practical methods of achieving effective planning and design criteria. For example, Faggeter (1996), Cheatley (1994) and Beckmann (1990) suggest that effective interpretive VCs:

- have no boundaries (either physically or intellectually);
- are seen in the context of the total visitor experience;
- are inclusive for all and a place to find respect – for each other, for conservation, the environment, the community and for difference; and
- integrate siting and design with the interpretive and information intent.

However, questions arise including: is possible for VCs to have no boundaries; is it realistic for VCs to be inclusive; what comprises of a total visitor experience; and how do you meet a fixed interpretive intent?

Generally, the literature does not adequately address issues of local and indigenous community participation or visitor consultation in the planning process. It is important that all stakeholders are included in the design and operation of Australian VCs because if these facilities are to be socially meaningful they need to be places where visitors and the community come to understand themselves. When considering community participation, planners need to address issues

of social capital, heritage ownership and community inclusion. As such, planners must identify whose authentic, social, natural or cultural values are being interpreted – are they those of government, agencies, architects, interpreters, local or indigenous communities, tourists or the environment? Thus, if an area's values are to be presented 'authentically', it is important to define what this term means, and recognise and include those who own or use the heritage in the planning process. This approach will help to address relevant site-specific issues including environmental, cultural and intrinsic heritage, cultural sensitivities, the local community, visitor expectations and the delivery of conservation messages.

Consequently, effective VCs planning is a complex task and the inclusion of all relevant site-specific issues may not be possible, as they may be too numerous or bridging the gap between the past and present may be too difficult. Thus, VC interpretation needs to openly recognise these limitations and admit that the view presented is one amongst many. In addition, VCs also need to reflect the values of the time or alternatively, they ought to acknowledge that a snapshot approach has been taken. Agencies, communities and VCs can also look to the future to introduce debate on alternative outcomes to current issues. As such, interpretation should be presented in an honest, entertaining, stimulating and challenging way that encourages the visitor to take a critical interest in the information presented.

Ultimately, Australian VC planning should address management, community and visitor needs, and take visitors beyond an understanding of the place but towards a sense of 'taking care'. It is important that visitors are aware of their impact on the host area. In addition, priority should be given to meeting local and/or indigenous community needs, because these people must not only live with the VC, but it is their knowledge, customs, enthusiasm and commitment that provides depth and substance to a facility to help ensure its sustainability. Given these factors, Australian VCs have the potential to reveal an area's beauty and intricacies and this foundation may provide a catalyst for the ultimate goal – the visitor as an environmental steward.

3.8 Interpretation and Learning

3.8.1 Informal learning environments

Like parks, forests, zoos, museums and galleries, interpretive VCs are places of informal learning (Evans 1999, Ham and Krumpe 1996; Serrell 1996). This type of learning communicates ideas and concepts by using different educational media including site-based interpretation. Informal education has evolved to distinguish between formal school based audiences and other audiences found outside the school system. Key elements of the informal learning environment are detailed in Table 3.2 and in this setting, according to Griffin (1999), Ham and Krumpe (1996), Screven (1996), and Ham (1992), individuals learn differently because people freely choose whether to attend, how long they will stay, or whether to pay attention to, and involve themselves in, learning. This theory suggests that informal learning depend on visitors giving attention voluntarily, and different approaches to planning and delivering interpretive information is required than those employed in school settings. However, it must be noted that today, many classroom settings incorporate characteristics of the informal learning environment.

Table 3.2 Characteristics of informal and formal learning environments.

INFORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (VISITOR CENTRES)	FORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (SCHOOL SETTINGS)
Voluntary	Compulsory
Unstructured	Structured
Unsequenced	Sequenced
Learner-centred	Teacher-centred
Contextually relevant	Relevance unclear
Heterogeneous grouping	Homogeneous groupings
Collaborative	Individual
Non-competitive	Competitive
Open-ended	Closed
Non-curriculum based	Curriculum-based
Unintended outcomes recognised	Unintended outcomes disregarded
Non-assessed	Assessed

Source - Griffin 1999:177

Christensen (1994) suggests that visitors have a favourite way (or learning modality) of receiving information (Table 3.3). Christensen categorises these learning domains as auditory, visual, kinaesthetic and symbolic/abstract modalities, and he recommends that elements from each modality be included in an exhibit to ensure it appeals to a wide audience and provides choice. Interestingly, smell is not included in this list.

Table 3.3 Incorporating learning modality into interpretive design.

MODALITY	TECHNIQUE	INTERPRETIVE ELEMENTS
Auditory Modality	Speech, music and song that may include computer generated material .	Those elements that foster a welcoming environment. • Interpretive talks • Sounds to create mood or recall emotion • Sound effects that connect people with concepts • Music introduces, emphasises or repeats concepts
Visual Modality	Pictures, props, drawings, films/video, and graphics	The audience needs to understand the visual image. • Display panels • Documentaries • Photographs, slides, paintings, posters, sketches
Kinaesthetic Modality	Dance, theatrics, gesture, touch, and movement	Elements that allow people to participate in physical action. • Guided tours • Plays • Interactive videos • Touch tables • Children's corner or interpretation/activities • Reflective spaces in which to contemplate
Symbolic or Abstract Modality	Reading, writing and arithmetic	Anything that allows people to read and analyse. • Brochures and handouts • Maps, signs and plans • Text displays • Poems and readings

Adapted from - Christensen 1994

This is important because if VCs provide interpretation to visitors in their preferred modality, they are more likely to absorb messages more easily. Serrell (1996) agrees, and suggests that modalities are related to learning styles. She presents the work by McCarthy (1987 in Serrell 1996) who identified the following four learners and interpretive learning styles:

- **Imaginative learners** – social interaction, listening and sharing encourages learning.

- **Analytical learners** – these people who prefer facts and sequential ideas.

- **Common-sense learner**s – learning is through discovery and the testing of theories.

- **Experimental learners** – these people learn by imaginative trial and error.

McCarthy's suggests that a person's genetic make-up and environmental stimuli influence learning style. This work directly applies to interpretive VCs as these facilities can accommodate visitors' different learning styles into exhibitions by providing variety and visitor choice. Serrell (1996) suggests that interpretive difference can be developed through experiences that are sequenced or unsequenced; pace-controlled or not controlled; peer group or authority led; concrete or abstract; participatory or observational; and verbal or nonverbal. The approach and the degree to which exhibits embody one design form should depend on the information being communicated and what experiences the VC aims to deliver.

3.8.2 Constructivist visitor centres

Ballantyne and Uzzell (1999:66) draw on constructivist theory to explain that when learners take a constructive approach they are actively involved in learning situations and construct meaning accordingly. This definition was developed in environmental learning and museum settings, and in these arenas the meaning is similar. According to Klein and Merritt (1994), environmental constructivism is knowledge actively constructed by the subject that results in

meaningful learning where ideas are integrated into existing structures of knowledge. Robertson (1994) agrees, and also stresses that conceptual knowledge is not passively received from the environment, nor does it occur in a social, political or historical vacuum. The constructivist museum also acknowledges that knowledge is created in the learner's mind and in this setting, exhibits allow visitors to draw their own conclusions (Ballantyne and Uzzell 1999; Screven 1996; Hein 1995). This view supports the work of Lee (1998), Uzzell and Ballantyne (1998) and Meredith *et al*. (1995), and as such, the affective learning domain must be an important learning mechanism in constructivist museums. The constructivist approach implies that the VC's exhibition or the experience itself is extended to include visitors who interpret, understand and impose their own meanings on the exhibits.

3.8.3 Mindful visitors

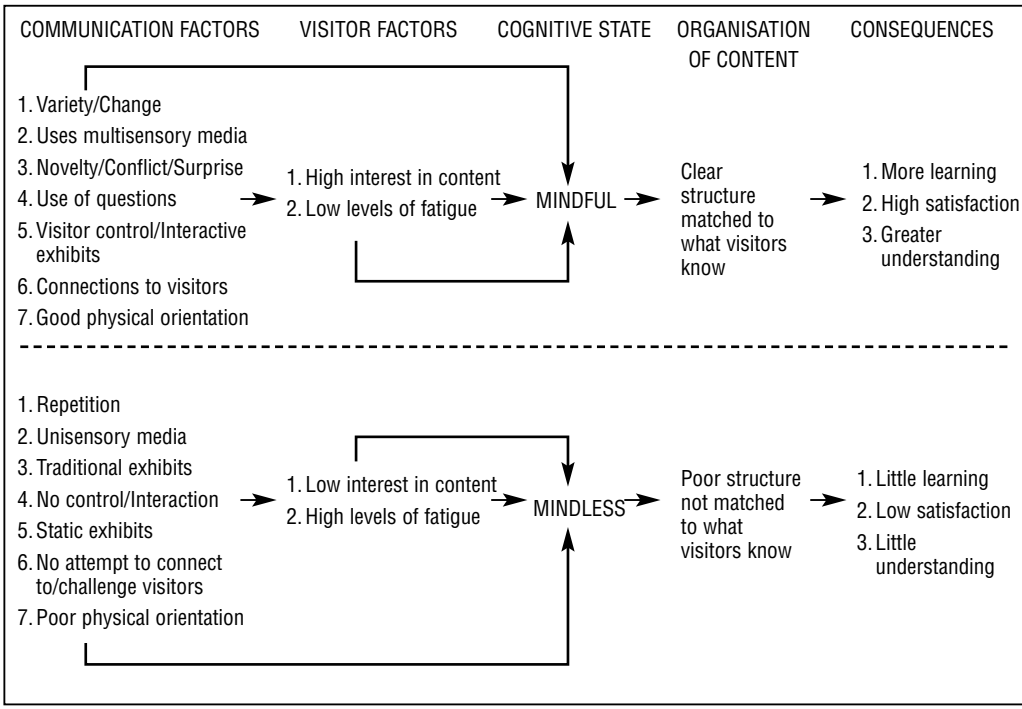
The Countryside Commission's (1978) formative study of 17 British VCs, found the variables contributing to effective interpretation were the interpretive theme, floor plan, media used, and overall atmosphere. This study found that there was not necessarily a positive correlation between enjoyment and learning. Given that learning is hard work and influenced by social interactions, learning may be perceived as satisfying but it may not be enjoyable. Overall, the literature identifies that interpretation with a capacity to impart information generally incorporates a number of key principles. In particular, Moscardo (1996a; 1998; 1999), Woods (1997), Serrell (1996), Christensen (1994) and Ham (1992), suggest that effective interpretation should include the following elements:

- respectful atmosphere;
- personal connections (particularly at the beginning of the experience);
- interpretation that challenges and encourages emotions (to help recall);
- dynamic, organised and orientated exhibits that positioned effectively;

- a good story concentrating on clear content;
- control through interaction or direct interpretive participation;
- variety, including multi-sensory and extreme physical exhibits, to capture audiences;
- interpretation that is novel, unexpected or surprising;
- questions to create conflict or ambiguity; and
- plan for alternative audiences.

Moscardo and Pearce (1986) were the first to introduce to tourism research the concept of visitor mindfulness and the effect this state has on learning outcomes in informal educational environments. They suggest that mindfulness is the active mental state comprising of information recall, subjective knowledge, and wanting more information about the topic. Their premise has been derived partly from the work of Langer *et al*. in 1978, who first presented the basic argument that in any given situation visitors can be either mindful or mindless (lacking awareness). Langer *et al*. (1989:140) has defined mindlessness as the 'single-minded reliance on information without the active awareness of alternative perspectives or alternative uses to which the information can be put'. Moscardo (1988; 1996a; 1998; 1999) confers and states that mindfulness is positively related to visitor enjoyment, increased learning and overall VC satisfaction. Moscardo's *Mindfulness Model for Communicating with Visitors* is considered an important interpretive VC design element and she identifies two factors influencing mindfulness at built heritage sites: setting factors and visitor factors (Figure 3.4). Setting factors include exhibits, displays tours, signs, maps and brochures. Visitor factors include place familiarity, cognitive orientation, visit motivation and companions. When these factors are combined they encourage mindful visitors who are more likely to learn and enjoy their visit. In addition, visitors are often more appreciative, aware of the consequences of their behaviour, and interested in discovering more about a place or topic. Woods (1997) agrees, and points out that when interpretive design does not follow mindfulness principles, its effectiveness is compromised.

Figure 3.4 Mindfulness model for communicating with visitors.



Source – Moscardo 1996a

However, care should be taken when applying mindfulness principles to all interpretive settings. For example, Korn's (1988) study of self-guiding brochures does not support the existing views held by museum educators and evaluators, in believing that question use in exhibit labels and texts attracts and motivates visitors to learn in informal settings. In addition, Korn argues that cased museum objects accompanied by labels are inherently different from objects integrated into environmental settings, and in these locations there is often no physical relationship between labels in self-guiding brochures and objects in the surrounding area. This study can be extended to interpretive VCs, as exhibits or signs within the facility may not necessarily relate to the local area, nor will they automatically encourage visitors to apply the information to the environment. For example, Faggetter (1996:19) recalls that the exceptional Rainforest

Walk at Maits Rest in the Otway National Park is 'betrayed by bland and poorly designed generic rainforest signage imposed from afar, and only tenuously related to the specifics of the site'.

3.8.4 Visitor centre fatigue

Moscardo (1996a) refers mainly to studies conducted in museums to argue that effective orientation and carefully designed flow patterns can reduce museum fatigue and encourage mindfulness. She suggests that if visitors are oriented and can easily find their way around a site, then effectiveness will be enhanced because a person's energy can be directed toward the interpretation. For example, Moscardo (1986 in Pearce 1988) identifies that visitors in Australia generally turned to the left to examine displays. Given this phenomenon, Pearce (1988) suggests that a compulsory anticlockwise exhibit order not only frustrates visitors, it reduces their orientation and results in difficulty for the reader. However, de Vries Robbé (1980) offers an alternative view in his study on VC movement patterns at the Queen Elizabeth Country Park Visitor Centre, Hampshire. Robbé found that although it seemed natural to design a clockwise circuit, as reading in our culture is from left to right, the physical and thematic layout encouraged visitors to do the reverse. Consequently, the literature recognises that visitor orientation, flow patterns within VCs and the display layout are important elements that influence learning. However, optimising these factors may depend upon site-specific considerations. Consequently, learning in informal learning environments is complex and multi-faceted, and the challenge for interpreters is to design VCs where people feel comfortable, included, stimulated, educated, enriched, informed and extended. According to Lee (1998), the aim of VCs is not only to persuasively communicate with visitors but also to change their attitudes. He identifies that attitudinal change is usually influenced by the perceived credibility of the message; the clarity, comprehension and argument of the message itself; the media used for transmission; and visitor characteristics.

3.9 Designing Effective Interpretation

3.9.1 Providing variety

Providing variety is important to attract visitor attention and encourage learning in interpretive VCs. However, providing variety is a complex issue not easily explained and a number of conflicting views as to what, when and how to provide variety in terms of modality (Table 3.3) are presented in the literature. For example, some research in museums and science centres indicates that the less novel (or gimmicky) the learning environment, the greater the student learning. Anderson and Lucas' (1997) informal education study in science museums generally supports this view. This study assessed exhibit novelty, its effect on the cognitive learning in year eight students, and the links between the exhibits and student learning recall. They found that gender did not influence learning and that the most frequently recalled exhibits shared a combination of large physical size, prominence in the gallery, and diversity of the sensory modes employed. However, these authors found that high degrees of novelty were likely to interfere with learning, although learning and even recall was unlikely to eventuate if an exhibit was initially unable to attract students.

Moscardo (1988) considers the issue differently, and states that mindfulness is positively related to how impressive the exhibit. In her study of visitor attention in Scottish Forestry Commission Centres, Moscardo found a relationship between mindfulness and exhibit complexity and she proposes that the structure underlying the organisation of the interpretation and/or exhibits, when combined with novelty, surprise or conflict induces mindfulness and enhances learning. This study found that moderate levels of complexity encouraged mindfulness and too little information discouraged mindfulness because visitors dealt with situations routinely. In contrast, Moscardo argues that too much novelty, conflict or information in a setting compromises mindfulness as a visitor's information processing will be directed towards coping with sensory overload. Peart and Kool (1988:126) agree that too much novelty reduces learning, however, in their study on dioramas at the British Columbia Provincial Museum, they found that these exhibits were not

necessarily the best vehicle for communicating ideas. Although dioramas were certainly impressive, their educative capacity (and by implication mindfulness) were limited and, in contrast, small exhibits whose message could be gleaned quickly appeared more effective. Thus, these authors generally concur with Anderson and Lucas (1997) and recommend that the inclusion of dioramas as a main feature should be used carefully and cautiously.

Moscardo (1991) builds on these earlier studies and suggests that visitors simply wish to experience anything new, and novelty – regardless of learning – enhances experience. Pearce (1988) agrees that visitors seek new experiences, but states that they are also interested in meeting new people and learning through cultural exchange. However, Moscardo (1996b:390) points out that 'there is little research evidence to demonstrate that guided tours or contact with interpretive staff' is effective in increasing visitor learning and she concludes this is only believed to be the case. Despite the lack of research into the benefits of staff contact with visitors, Moscardo (1998) points out that positive responses have been recorded for Discovery Corners which offers contact with interpretive staff and the opportunity for interaction with objects that would otherwise be neglected. It can be argued that a visitor's learning and overall experience is enhanced when VCs offer guided tours or contact with staff. In addition, personal contact with visitors may help to lessen VC fatigue by reducing the amount of information visitors' need to process. This in turn provides visitors more control.

3.9.2 Attracting and holding power

Shettel (1976) proposes that exhibits must have attracting, holding and teaching power if they are to be effective. Thus, information or displays presented in VCs will only be effective if they first attracts visitors. The literature agrees with Shettel's findings and many studies have reported poor visitor attention to exhibits. For example, Moscardo (1998) presents the average time spent by visitors looking at paintings in art galleries, as it was initially described by Robinson's enduring findings in 1928. Robinson found that visitor attention was the greatest during the first half of their visit with peak attention occurring when they observed the first 20-40% of the displays. This pattern has been widely observed in museums and visitors tend to

allocate their attention consistently. In addition, Falk (1991) identifies that visitors allocate 15-20% of their attention to their own social grouping and another 3-8% to other people. Meredith *et al*. (1995:29) concur, and they state that visitors may allocate attention to exhibits and people simultaneously, and that such 'interaction may greatly influence the quality of their overall experience'. In addition, Meredith *et al*. found that dynamic exhibits that require the visitor to act on them in some way, elicit increased levels of verbal interaction. Thus, a display's attracting and holding power is influenced by visitor interest and it competes with the social interactions people have whilst in the facility. Falk *et al*. (1985) conclude that visitors spend the first few minutes orienting themselves, the next half-hour observing exhibits and the last 15-30 minutes 'cruising' through the museum and stopping occasionally to look more closely at exhibits. Thus, designers need to provide increased informal sensory modalities to attract interest, and structure VC interpretation to maximise social interactions in meaningful ways. For example, social interactions can be improved by staff and volunteers providing friendly service, or by including interactive learning experiences that foster parents and children to work together.

3.9.3 Telling a good and story

Tilden's fourth principal states that 'interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part' (Tilden 1977:9). Thus, telling a story with themes provides a single focus or core item to which all other information can be linked. In addition, when interpretation has a theme and it is related to a key idea or central message – 'it becomes easier to follow and more meaningful to people' (Ham 1992:33). This is because people tend to recall plot structures and the main ideas, but they often forget facts and figures. Ham and Krumpe (1996:18) agree, and state that 'a well-articulated theme expresses a belief, whether it be a behaviour, event, person or object' and that 'communication that develops a theme advocates a belief'. They conclude that interpretive themes that convincingly advocate behavioural, normative and control beliefs are more likely to be effective in achieving desired outcomes than those merely presenting arbitrary facts of presumed visitor interest. Thus, thematic approaches result in more interesting and memorable presentations, as interpreters can identify what information to include.

Ham and Krumpe (1996) reminds us that people learn differently and audiences need themes to be presently in different ways to ensure that everyone comprehends the main message. In addition, visitors need to learn themes quickly before they loose their attention or leave the site. Oral or written presentations can be used in conjunction with exhibits, dioramas and interactive displays. However, the approach taken when creating each presentation differs. For example, according to Ham (1992), an oral presentation is linear and controlled by the interpreter as the theme is revealed at the beginning and reinforced at the end. Alternatively, exhibits and written displays are nonlinear as audiences will not read the entire exhibit and nor will they read the information in the same order. Ham identifies a common failure of exhibits and written displays. He suggests that too much information is provided as a linear, sequential presentation of ideas and, when designing themes that are unfamiliar to visitors, the main ideas need to be kept to a manageable number. He refers to Miller's 1956 study that presented the principal of *The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two*. This principal suggests that on average, humans are capable of making sense of only seven plus or minus two separate and new ideas at a time. Given this, Ham (1992) identifies that since some people can only process five new ideas, the actual number of main points should be five or fewer. In addition, a limited number of main ideas make interpretation more interesting, understandable and memorable. Therefore, it is important that exhibits are designed nonlinearly where the main heading is conspicuous, and the theme titles and levels are clearly defined to ensure that the central ideas of the exhibit are conveyed.

The literature generally supports Ham and Krumpe's views regarding effective interpretive theme presentation. For example, an early study of four American VCs by Washburne and Wagar in 1972, found a marked preference for dynamic, animated and changing presentations as well as a particular interest in violent subject matter. Pearce (1988) recounts a second study of American VCs by Zube, Crystal and Palmer in 1978, where it was concluded that centres with a historic theme are generally more satisfying than those only with an environmental or recreational theme. This was also found in the Countryside Commission (1978) study of British VCs and in the later study by de Vries Robbé (1980) at the Queen Elizabeth Country Park Visitor Centre, Hampshire. Finally, Lee (1998) concurs with Negra and

Manning (1997), and suggests that environmental themes may be more memorable if they are given immediacy. However, Uzzell and Ballantyne (1998) criticise framing activities and experiences around stories, themes and messages, as this approach often fails to consider a visitor's previous experience, and does not help visitors extend their learning to the world outside. Thus, VC interpretation should consider a visitor's knowledge, where issues are used as a springboard to engage visitors in considering attitudes, values and behaviour that is not purely site specific. Absher (1997) agrees, and suggests that exhibits presented chronologically or in a single orderly manner are outdated and interpretation must move outside this constrained, theme-focused model to communicate with more diverse audiences in more diverse ways and settings. Unfortunately, Absher does not provide an outline of how this might be achieved.

3.9.4 Exhibits

Exhibits communicate themes to visitors, and although the literature presents a number of ideas for developing effective displays, there are no definitive rules and only guidelines are presented. For example, Ham (1992) suggests that exhibits do not need to be expensive to be effective and although an expensive exhibit may be more attractive and durable, it does not necessarily communicate more information. Thus, communication is a matter of conceptual design rather than being only artistically based, and giving meaning and context to the interpretation is at least as important. Moscardo (1993; 1996a) and Screven (1996) and Patterson and Bitgood (1988) agree, and they identify a number of principles that influence visitor behaviour (Table 3.5). These authors suggest that a display's condition can be classified into exhibit, visitor and architectural factors that together, they influence behaviour and the display's success.

Table 3.5 Principles of visitor behaviour.

VC FACTOR	EXHIBIT CONDITION	VISITOR BEHAVIOUR
Exhibit/Object Factors	Size	Larger size results in longer viewing times and recall.
	Motion	Moving elements result in better visitor attention.
	Aesthetic factors	Unity, emphasis, balance, patterns and colours relate to focus.
	Novelty/rarity	There is an inherent attraction in novel/rare things.
	Sensory factors	Multi-sensory exhibits produce longer viewing times.
	Interactive factors	Interactive exhibits, displays and information encourage attracting and holding power.
Visitor Factors	Special interests	Visitors are more likely to select interest areas.
	Visitor participation	Associated with better attracting and holding power.
	Object satiation or fatigue	Repetition is related to decreased attracting and holding power.
	Demographic factors	Age, educational level and group composition.
	Other psychological factors	Perception of attractive exhibits, displays and information, crowding and visitor comfort. Exits attract visitors.
Architectural Factors	Exhibit visibility	Barriers to visibility reduce viewing time.
	Exhibit proximity	The closer visitors get the longer they stay.
	Realism	Naturalistic exhibits provide memorable experiences.
	Sensory competition	Exhibit stimuli compete for visitor attention.

Adapted from - Moscardo 1993; 1996a; Screven 1996; Ham 1992; Patterson and Bitgood 1988

Ham (1992) indicates that viewers (often less than one per cent) only read a fraction of even an expensive exhibit's text, and of those that do, most are knowledgeable in the topic presented. Overall, audiences spent about one third of the time that was actually necessary reading exhibits. According to Neal (1976) in her advice to those writing texts for museum exhibits, most adults read about 250-300 words/minute and the maximum average attention span is

approximately 45 seconds. The literature widely accepts this finding, and early research by Melton (1972) found that visitors pay little attention to displays and looked at them for approximately eight seconds. Thus, if visitors scan exhibits, interpreters must ask whether audiences grasp the messages presented or if they can remember any more than a few facts and images. It is argued that exhibits receive little more than a fleeting glance and given this, they must be concise, easy to read and present fewer than 250 words. In addition, Ham (1992) suggests designing exhibits on a number of levels that allow visitors to absorb as much of the exhibit as they like, and interpreters should follow the Fazio and Gilbert's 'A.B.C.s' when designing displays. As such, exhibits should be: *attractive* and pleasant to look at; *brief* and simple; and *clearly organised* so the theme can be recognised and understood quickly. Thus, it is important interpreters consider how the VC and each display impacts on visitors.

3.10 Integrating Interpretive Design with Evaluation

Interpretive VCs provide an informal environment designed to allow visitors to stop where and when they wish, to allow their interests to drive their learning, and to share what interests them. This results in each visitor's learning being complex and multi-faceted. Thus, the challenge for interpreters is to design VC spaces where visitors feel comfortable and where they are able to make easy connections with their own experience and emotions. In summary, the following conclusions emerge in this review from both museum and VC studies:

- more needs to be known about learning in informal settings;
- people (visitors, staff and residents) are important to the VC's sustainability;
- visitors are eager learners, but they do not want to spend time or effort absorbing information;
- a visitor's personal motivations and goals, and the social interactions they have, are important interrelated variables that impact learning and site experience;
- mindful visitors are more likely to learn and enjoy their visit;

- visitors pay little attention or none at all to exhibits;
- interpretation does not need to be expensive;
- interpretive meaning and context is important;
- interactive exhibits are more successful in attracting and holding attention; and
- visitors do not appear to learn or remember a great deal from their visits.

Given that learning is hard work and visitors do not appear to absorb information easily, interpretation needs to focus on visitor needs. Successful interpretation communicates quickly; it is likely to have a 'big idea', theme or story; and it 'will clarify, limit, and focus the nature and scope of an exhibition and provide a well-defined goal against which to rate its success' (Serrell 1996:1). This approach encourages visitors to be mindful and to make comparisons between the familiar and the new. Ultimately, interpretation should be planned in the light of a visitor's previous knowledge, where issues are used as a springboard to engage them. However, little research has been completed to assess the factors that attract and hold visitor attention and given that they are eager to learn, it is important to understand why they do not concentrate on exhibits.

Considering the resources required to build VCs and develop interpretation, and the scarcity of research specifically detailing the planning, design and evaluation of these facilities, it is important to evaluate a centre's success to ensure it meets the needs of visitors, agencies, the tourism industry and local communities. Not only is it important that interpretation be integrated in the initial design of a VC, on-going evaluation of the centre's operation and exhibits should be undertaken from the beginning of the VC program. Incorporating evaluation into a VC's design ensures that they are accountable, and it helps to assess whether a centre's operation or interpretation meets management and visitor objectives, and if not, it provides recommendations and an opportunity to respond to changes. In addition, meaningful outcomes of the evaluation process can be

incorporated into the design of new centres. As a result, VC planning and design is an integrated process that includes interpretation planning and design, and on-going evaluation from the start of the program.

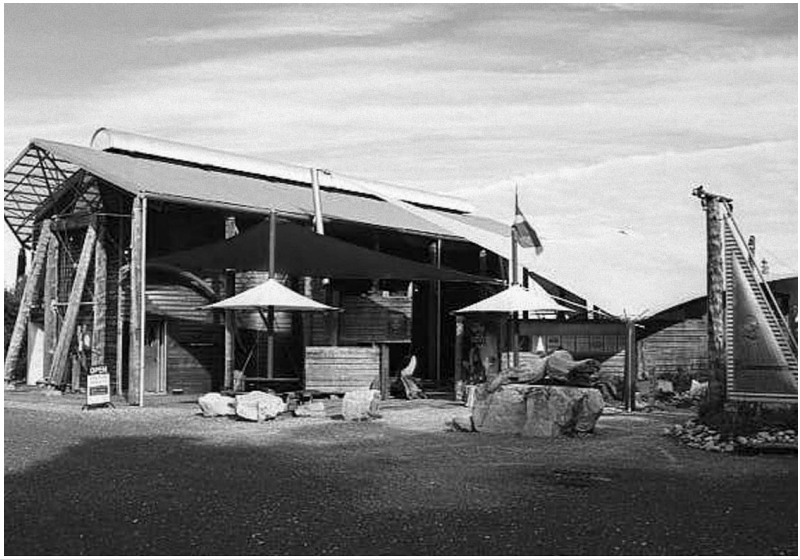
4. STRAHAN VISITOR CENTRE RESULTS

4.1 Visitor Observations

A total of 67 visitor observation checklists were completed at the SVC during the visitor survey. A total of 2,048 individual observations were recorded as people moved around the outside the Centre and through the information foyer, and 208 observations were recorded as people moved through the display (Appendix B). This research observed a conversion rate of 9% for visitors moving from the information foyer to the display. This conversion rate generally agrees with the 10% conversion rate observed in the pilot survey and 12% conversion rate calculated by TREC. It is important to note that visitors spending more than half an hour at the Centre may have been recorded more than once. However, as the aim of the behavioural mapping component of this study was to identify how visitor used the Centre, the re-counting of individuals does not negatively impact the results sought.

Visitors utilised the outside areas at the front of the SVC throughout each day and generally orientated themselves outside the Centre before entering the information foyer (Plate 4.1). The researchers noted that a number of visitors had difficulty ascertaining if the Centre was open, where they should enter the building, or what the Centre offered. In addition, the rear (wharf side) of the Centre was under utilised except when visitors used the area to gain access to the township or parking.

Plate 4.1 Obscured entry into the Strahan Visitor Centre.



Source: Fallon 2000

Once inside the information foyer, visitors browsed; looked at tourist information, souvenirs and maps; or interacted with staff to ask questions, book services or purchase items (Plate 4.2). The foyer was often crowded, particularly at peak times and visitors needed to queue at the information desk for service. After perusing information or accessing services, visitors then made the decision to pay and see the display. This decision was generally made once visitors had 'peeked' around the corner of the display's entrance to see what was inside the area.

Plate 4.2 Small, dark information foyer.

Source: Fallon 2000

This interstitial area between the Centre and the local surrounds was highly utilised and an important aspect of the Centre. Visitors walked through this area, stopped and looked at signs or the building, saw the play – *The Ship that Never Was*, sat at outside seating, played checkers at one of the outdoor settings or interacted with the block and tackle display (Plate 4.3).

Plate 4.3 Interstitial area outside the Strahan Visitor Centre.

Source: Fallon 2000

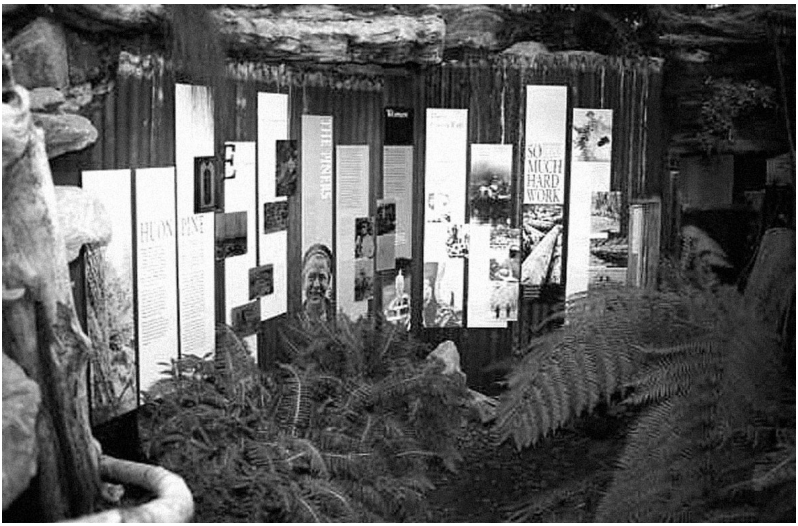
The amphitheatre was generally empty. However, 30 minutes prior to the start and during the first session of the theatrical play at 5:30pm, this area was filled to capacity in excess of 100 people (Plate 4.4). Visitor numbers attending the second session of the play at 8:30pm were more than halved.

Plate 4.4 The amphitheatre.

Source: Fallon 2000

For those visitors seeing the display, they generally looked at the exhibits in a sequential manner and overcrowding did not occur due to the low number of people entering this area. Visitors appeared relaxed when reading the text panels or looking at exhibits, were able to amble through the display at their own pace and did not appear to be fatigued at the end of the experience (Plate 4.5). The researcher observed that visitors 'cruising' through the display quickly squeezed past those spending more time at each exhibit. In addition, visitors with young children in strollers tended to leave the equipment at one location and carry the infant.

Plate 4.5 Text panels and rainforest.



Source: Fallon 2000

Visitors were observed in all areas of the display, over half either read or directly interacted with the exhibits and 12% of visitors were children (Figure 4.1). The interactive hydrogenerator exhibit located towards the end of the display was the most utilised and visitors read the associated text panels, or operated and helped others use the equipment. The next most utilised exhibits in order of preference were the rainforest and convict exhibits, Aboriginal people, conflict and suburban bungalow exhibits and pining. More visitors were observed reading convict text panels followed by conflict, then rainforest and Aboriginal exhibits. The suburban bungalow offered visitors the greatest opportunity for interaction with the display and here they stopped, read and touched the exhibit; looked at a video; sat or helped others. Fewer visitors were observed at the TWWHA, conservationists and economy exhibits.

Table 4.1 Observations of visitors in the interpretive display.

EXHIBIT ELEMENT	FREQUENCY								
	CHILD NO	WALKS	LOOKS /STOPS	READS	TOUCHES	VIDEO	SITS	HELPS	TOTAL
Rainforest/Huon pine walk	2	4	4	15	1				24
Aboriginal culture	4		8	15					23
Convict history			2	22					24
Piners' history		3	7	9					19
Conservationists/art works	1	4	3	4					11
Economy exhibits				5				2	7
Conflict/conservation	1	2	2	19					23
Why World Heritage?	3	1	7	5					13
Suburban bungalow	3	1	5	4	2	5	5	1	23
Hydrogenerator	5		4	1	16			4	25
Seating 5 - display	4			1			9		10
Reference library				1					1
Void area	3		4				2		6

4.2 Structured Visitor Questionnaire Survey

4.2.1 Visitor Profile

Table 4.2 provides a sociodemographic profile for the total survey sample. The sample comprised a relatively even spread of respondents across gender and age categories, although 50% of respondents were aged between 30 and 49 years of age. The respondents' ages ranged from between 16 to 75 years for females, and 17 to 70 years for males. Other noteworthy features were that 76% of visitors were Australians travelling mostly from Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland and 16% of visitors were overseas tourists. This result is generally consistent with the breakdown of all visitors to Strahan (Brkic 2001). Interestingly, 68% of visitors to the Centre had completed tertiary qualifications. The Tasmania Visitor Survey 1998/99 identifies that 35.6% of visitors to Tasmania are university graduates (Tourism Tasmania 1999b:31).

Table 4.2 Sociodemographic profiles and travel origin of the total sample.

TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 252)	VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Gender	Male	129	51
	Female	123	49
Age	<20	10	4
(1 respondent declined)	20-29	51	20
	30-39	63	25
	40-49	63	25
	50-59	46	18
	>60	18	7
Education completed	High school (to year 10)	33	13
(2 declined)	Matriculation (to year 12)	30	12
	Technical qualification[1]	16	6
	Tertiary qualification[2]	171	68
Visitor type by origin	**Total overseas**	**39**	**16**
	UK/England	14	6
	North Europe	13	5
	USA/Canada	8	3
	Other	4	2
	Total interstate	**191**	**76**
	Victoria	66	26
	New South Wales	55	22
	Queensland	31	12
	Western Australia	21	8
	South Australia	16	7
	Northern Territory	2	1
	Total intrastate	**22**	**9**

[1]Trade or TAFE certificate
[2]University Bachelor, Post Graduate or Diploma study

Patterns of local and regional travel are detailed in Table 4.3 and selected cross tabulation results are detailed in Appendix C. Over half the respondents were first time visitors to Tasmania (51%) and nine out of every ten people visited the SVC for the first time. Strahan was seen by most visitors as a short stay holiday destination, usually visited as part of a State-wide tour. The most common travel parties were couples (41%), single visitors (28%) or those travelling as part of a group (10%). Conversely, visitors to Strahan were more likely to be couples (60%), those travelling in a group (33%), single visitors (7%)

or visitors travelling with children (14%) (Brkic 2001). Groups sizes to the SVC generally consisted of between 3-4 people (with those visiting the Centre ranging from three to eighteen people), and over two-thirds of groups to the Centre travelled with children (Brkic 2001). Consequently, the SVC appears to attract a greater proportion of single visitors and those travelling with children, but fewer couples and groups - than those travelling to Strahan in general.

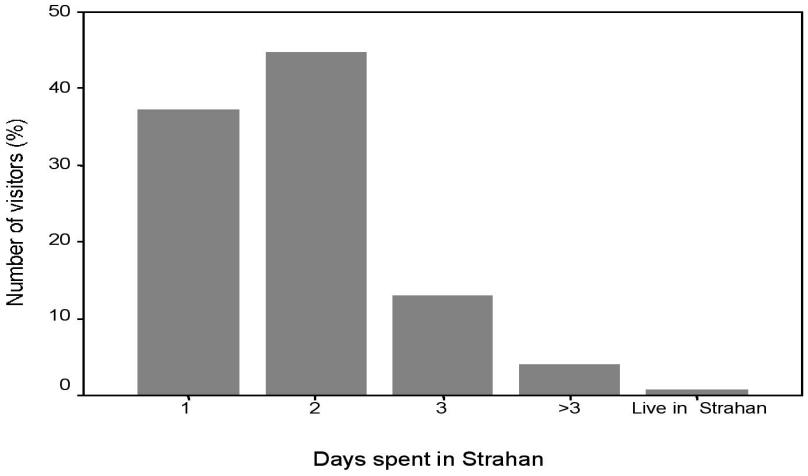
Table 4.3 Local and regional travel of visitors to the Strahan Visitor Centre.

TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 252)	VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Visitor type by travel party	Single	71	28
	Couple	103	41
	Adult group (>2 adults)	25	10
	Children present	53	21
	Mobility problems evident	2	1
Length of stay in Tasmania	>7 days	40	16
	8-14 days	125	49.5
	15-21 days	46	18
	> 21 days	19	7.5
Length of stay in Strahan	1 day	94	37.5
	2 days	113	45
	3 days	33	13
	>3 days	10	4
First time visitors	To Tasmania	140	56
	Overseas	37	15
	Interstate	103	41
	To Centre	216	86
Main reason for visiting Strahan	Holiday	246	98
	Other[1]	4	1.5
Mode of transport	Private vehicle	121	48
	Rental vehicle	108	42
	Coach tour	17	7
	Other[2]	4	2

[1]Other reason given was for business
[2]Other modes given were motorcycles and bicycles

Visitors to the SVC tended to use private transport (48%) then rental vehicles (42%), whereas those travelling to Strahan tended to use rental vehicles (52%) then private transport (36%) (Brkic 2001). This result suggests that visitors travelling to Strahan using rental vehicles utilised the Centre less than those using private vehicles. Significantly, all visiting groups used private transport. However, adult groups (particularly those with children) utilised private transport to a greater capacity (19%), as did intrastate (95%) and interstate (50%) travellers. Couples (53%) or those travelling from interstate (45%) and overseas (56%) mainly used rental vehicles. In addition, travellers younger than 20 years of age tended to arrive by coach. The reliance on private transport declined as the level of education increased. In excess of 96% of people visiting the SVC were on holiday and on average, respondents stayed in Strahan for two days, over 95% of visitors stayed no longer than three days and those staying greater than three days tended to be travelling alone (Figure 4.1).

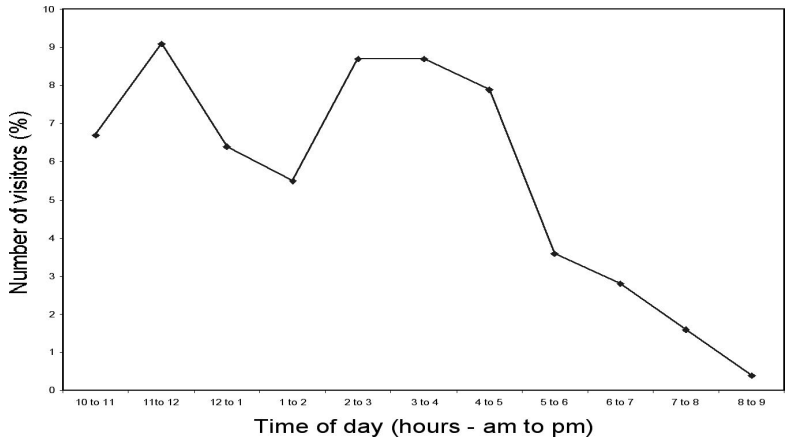
Figure 4.1 Length of stay in Strahan of visitors to the Strahan Visitor Centre.



4.2.2 Level of Usage

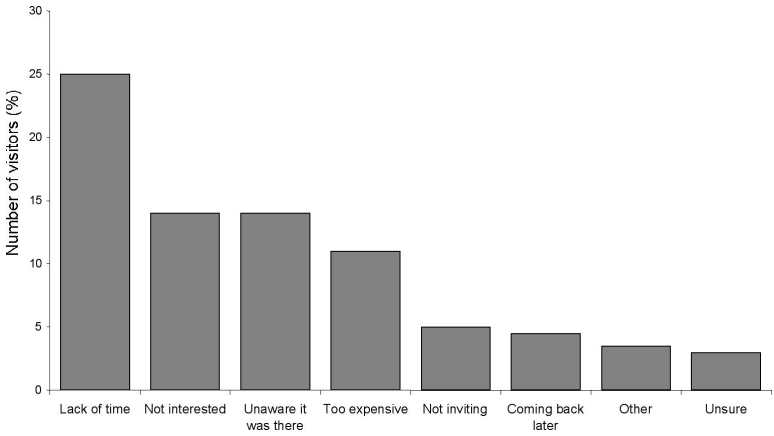
During the survey, two peak visitation periods each day was identified (Figure 4.2). The first peak occurred between 11am and 12 noon. The second peak from 2:30pm until 4:30pm. This peak coincided with the return of the half-day Gordon River Cruises and extended through the afternoon when the full-day cruises returned to Strahan.

Figure 4.2 Visitation to the Strahan Visitor Centre.



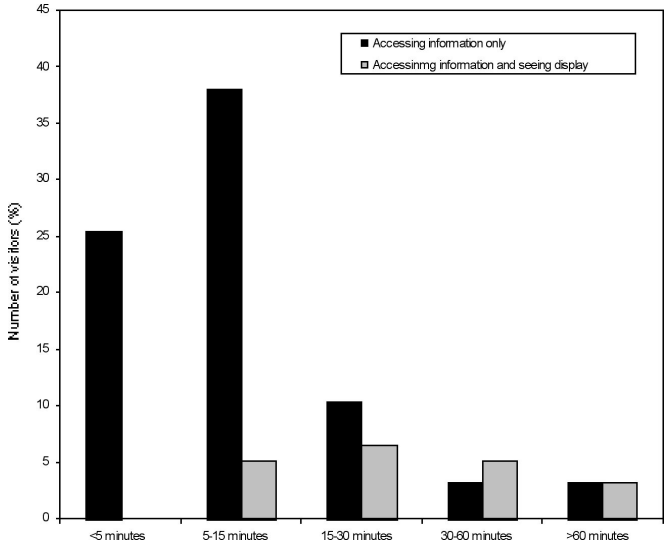
The visitor survey revealed that a low proportion of visitors entering the information foyer paid a fee to go through the display and only 20% of all survey respondents saw the display. Visitors paying to see the display were generally evenly distributed across origin, visitor group, sex and age; and 32% of respondents were single people, followed respectively by couples (30%), adult groups with children (28%) and adult groups (10%). Intrastate visitors or groups with children appeared more likely to pay to see the display. Reasons given by visitors for not seeing the display included limited time (64%), not being interested (14%), being unaware it was there (14%) or expense (11%) (Figure 4.3). Of those with health or mobility problems, 1% of respondents did not access the display and respondents were more likely to avoid the display if they were less than twenty years of age, visiting as a couple or an overseas tourist.

Figure 4.3 Reasons for visitors not paying to see the interpretive display.



The time visitors spent at the SVC ranged from less than 5 minutes (25%) to over 60 minutes (6%). Most visitors (69%) spent less than 15 minutes at the Centre (Figure 4.4). Visitors spent on average 5-15 minutes in the information foyer and 15-30 minutes at the Centre if they saw the display. Time was a significant factor influencing a visitor's decision to see the display.

Figure 4.4 Time visitors spend at the Strahan Visitor Centre.



It is important to note that some visitors may have spent more time at the SVC than the results indicate. This is because visitors can enter and leave the Centre as often as they like without charge, and they are able to access the display on the day they pay their entry fee as often as they like. However, the results are unlikely to have been greatly biased by this factor as only 11% of respondents had previously visited the Centre to access information or the display during the previous two days and 4% had visited at some time in the past. In addition, these results do not take into account those visitors returning to see the play.

4.2.3 Visitor Information Sources

Table 4.4 provides a summary of how visitors found out about the SVC, their expectations and what they purchased.

Table 4.4 Reasons for visiting and visitor exceptions regarding tourist information.

TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 252)	VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Discovery of Centre	Discovered centre on arrival	177	70
	Referred by others	45	18
	Tourist information	29	11.5
	Other[1]	2	.5
Reason for visiting	Find tourist information	118	47
	Looking/browsing	68	27
	Booking services	26	10
	See/enquire about play	24	10
	See interpretive display	3	1
	Other	13	5
What was missing at Centre	Information found	166	66
	Browsing only	69	27
	Information not found	17	7
	Local area information	7	3
	Booking services	5	2
	Other information	5	2
Visitors purchasing items	Did not purchase	180	71
	Retail merchandise purchased	72	29
	Postcards	28	11
	Tickets	25	10
	Other	19	8

[1]Other included Tassie Link Explorer Pass and phonebook

Over two thirds of all respondents (70%) discovered the SVC on arrival to Strahan. Of these visitors, 6% were directed to the Centre from signs in Strahan and 18% on the basis of recommendations. These visitors were either referred by commercial operators (13%) or learned of the Centre through word of mouth (5%). A number of respondents indicated they learned of the SVC through tourist information (11.5%), with 4% of these people specifically indicating they either learned of the Centre in the Lonely Planet Guidebook or from a map. Most visitors came to the Centre to find information (47%), look and browse (27%) or book services and/or enquire about the play (20%). Generally, visitors found the information they sought (66%). However, one in twenty visitors (5%) identified a lack of local area information or booking services.

Approximately one third of visitors purchased items at the Centre (29%), with postcards and ticket sales being the most popular (21%). Age, education, where visitors travelled from, time spent at the Centre, or time spent in Strahan did not unduly influence their desire to purchase. However, visitors younger than 20 years of age, intrastate travellers or those seeing the display tended to purchase fewer goods. Conversely, couples tended to purchase more items (51%) as opposed to other groups (25%).

4.2.4 Visitor Evaluation of the Strahan Visitor Centre

When asked how satisfied visitors were with the SVC, 86% of respondents commented favourably about the Centre and 14% commented negatively. Females tended to be more satisfied than males with the SVC and the longer visitors spent at the Centre the lower their dissatisfaction.

When asked about the SVC's best and worst aspects, visitors were generally able to identify more positive attributes than negative ones (Table 4.5). A third of visitors were particularly enthusiastic about the building's design (33%) and 20% of visitors were impressed with the range of information provided. In addition, visitors commented positively on the display (15% - or 76% of all those accessing this area), the play (4% - noting that most respondents had yet to see the play), and the interactive block and tackle and checkers board outside the building (2%). Criticisms included staffing deficiencies (10%), lack of local area information (9%), crowding in the information foyer (6%) or issues regarding parking (4%).

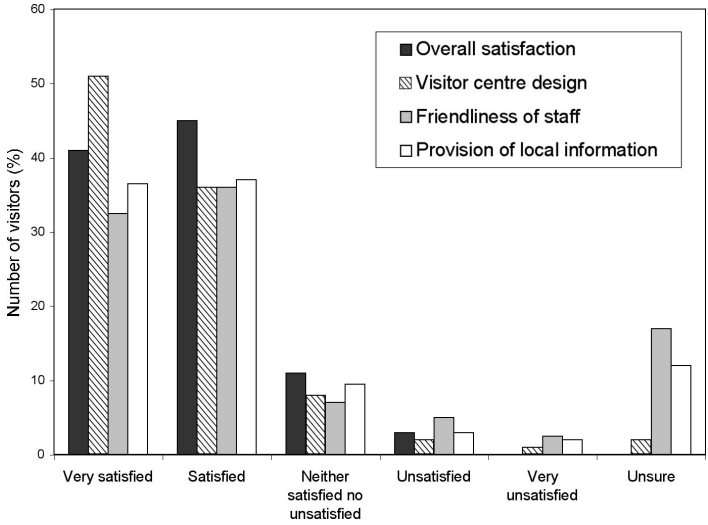
Table 4.5 Best and worst aspects of the Strahan Visitor Centre.

BEST ASPECTS		WORST ASPECTS	
VARIABLE	**PERCENTAGE**	**VARIABLE**	**PERCENTAGE**
Architecture/design	33	No comment	51
Range of information	21	Crowding/lack of space	6
Display/aspects of display	15	Unfriendly/impolite staff	6
No comment	11	Lack of local information	5
Location	8	Information layout/clarity	5
Friendly/helpful staff	7	Insufficient staff	4
Unique/interesting/different	6	Lack of Centre promotion	4
Play (The Ship that Never Was)	4	Insufficient parking/parking fees	4
Services (including Internet)	4	Unsure	4
Unsure	3	Insufficient access	3
Souvenirs	2	Insufficient entrance signage	3
Block & tackle	1	Insufficient seating	3
Checkers board	1	Insufficient souvenirs	3

* More than one comment possible for each respondent

Respondents were then asked to rate the SVC's design, friendliness of the staff and the provision of local area information. These ratings are compared with overall visitor satisfaction in the Centre in Figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5 Overall visitor satisfaction with the Strahan Visitor Centre and their rating of the design of the building, friendliness of the staff and provision of local area information.

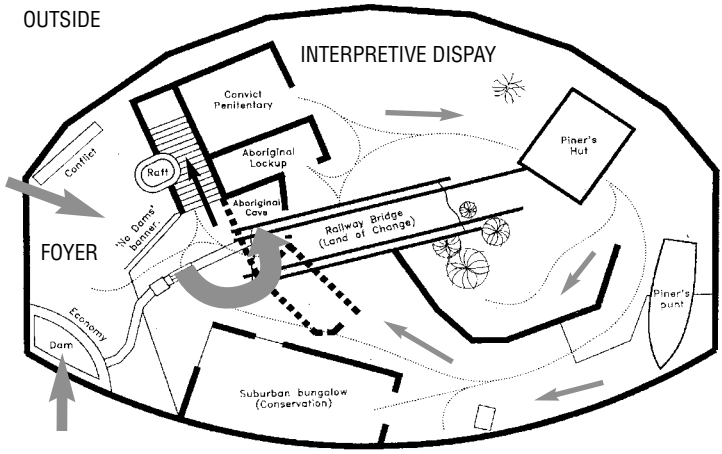


When rating the Centre's design, 87% of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied, 3% were specifically unsatisfied and 2% were unable to provide a rating. Respondents were more satisfied with the Centre's design than with the friendliness of the staff or provision of local information. Visitors generally rated the friendliness of the staff favourably, 68.5% were very satisfied or satisfied, 7.5% were specifically unsatisfied and 17% were unable to provide a rating. When rating the provision of local information, 73.5% of visitors were very satisfied or satisfied, 5% were specifically unsatisfied and 12% were unable to provide a rating as they had not used the service.

4.2.5 The Interpretive Display

The interpretive display at the SVC takes a sequential, historical, chronological and theme based approach (Figure 4.6). The Centre uses conflict to retell the personal values, beliefs and memories of the designers and some local residents. The central theme of the display is ecology. This theme is comprised of eight sub-themes including Tasmanian rainforest, Aboriginal culture, convicts, pining, economy (forestry, mining and tourism), conservationists, conflict and the TWWHA. Themes relevant to Tasmania's West Coast that are not presented include maritime history, fishing, mining, coastal ecology, and flora and fauna.

Figure 4.6 Strahan Visitor Centre visitor flow paths.



Wide arrows: entry to centre
Curved arrow: entry to display
Narrow arrows: display flow

Source: McArthur and Gardener 1992

The sociodemographic breakdown of those paying to see the display was similar to the characteristics identified for all SVC visitors. However, differences included an increased conversion rate of visitors accessing the display if they spent more time in Strahan, or travelled from intrastate (9% to Centre - 14% to display). Conversely, a decreased conversion rate was noted for couples (41% to Centre - 30% to display) and overseas visitors (16% to Centre - 10% to display) (Tables 4.2, 4.3).

Visitors generally spent more time at the SVC (15-30 minutes) if they paid to see the display. Significantly, most visitors felt the display told a good story (88%) and they considered it to be value for money (92%) (Appendix C). The satisfaction visitors expressed in paying to see the display appeared to be dependent upon the display's ability to tell a good story.

Comments made by respondents were generally very positive. One in three respondents described the display as being educational (34%), one in four described it as being great or good (24%), and just under 25% of people said it was either thought provoking or made them more environmentally aware (Table 4.6). In addition, 20% of visitors provided an emotional response and said the display made them feel sad (20%) and they either felt sorrow or empathy for those depicted in the stories, or they felt sympathy for the Aboriginal people. Of those providing negative comments, 8% of respondents indicated the display did not evoke any particular feelings or change to their views, 6% indicated the stories were unbalanced or subjective and 4% felt that too much information was provided.

Table 4.6 Popularity of words and phases used to describe the display.

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	%
Educational	17	34
Great/good/enjoyed it	12	24
Thought provoking	6	12
Environmental awareness	5	10
Interesting	5	10
Sympathy for Aboriginal people	5	10

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	%
Sorrow/empathy	5	10
No feeling/didn't change	1	8
Valuable experience	3	6
Subjective/unbalanced	3	6
No comment	3	6
Interactive	2	4
Too much information	2	4

[Note: more than one comment possible for each respondent]

When asked about which sub-themes visitors liked, read or learned the most from, 95% of respondents identified the themes most liked and read, and 86% indicated they learned something from the experience. Visitors liked and read the most about Aboriginal people. Pining was the next most liked and read sub-theme, followed by conservationists.

Visitor observations conducted by the researchers during the survey period confirmed these sub-themes as being very popular (Table 4.1). However, a greater number of visitors were observed viewing rainforest and convict sub-themes, respondents indicated that these sub-themes were the least liked and read, followed by the TWWHA, economy and conflict sub-themes.

These results may indicate that although visitors stop and look at exhibits, holding and attracting power does not necessarily equate to overall satisfaction. In terms of knowledge, visitors felt they learned most about conservationists, although they also learned a considerable amount from the exhibits depicting Aboriginal culture and piners history equally. Respondents claimed to have learned little from the other themes, particularly the conflict, TWWHA or rainforest themes. Finally, 6% of respondents did not like the display, 6% did not read the interpretive text panels and 14% of respondents felt they had not learned anything specific.

The interpretive sub-themes visitors enjoyed, read and learned the most about are detailed in Figure 4.7. All visitor groups enjoyed the exhibits depicting Aboriginal culture and piners history. Single people and couples tended to enjoy most sub-themes, although single

people preferred the piners exhibits (37.5%) and couples preferred the rainforest vegetation (26.7%). Adult groups enjoyed the exhibits depicting Aboriginal culture (80%), followed by the piners exhibits (20%). Those with children tended to enjoy the exhibits detailing Aboriginal culture and conservationists equally (29% each). Age or level of education did not appear to influence the themes visitors enjoyed. However, all visitors over 60 years of age looked at the convict exhibits, 60% particularly enjoyed the piners exhibits, and 80% chose not to look at the Aboriginal culture exhibits.

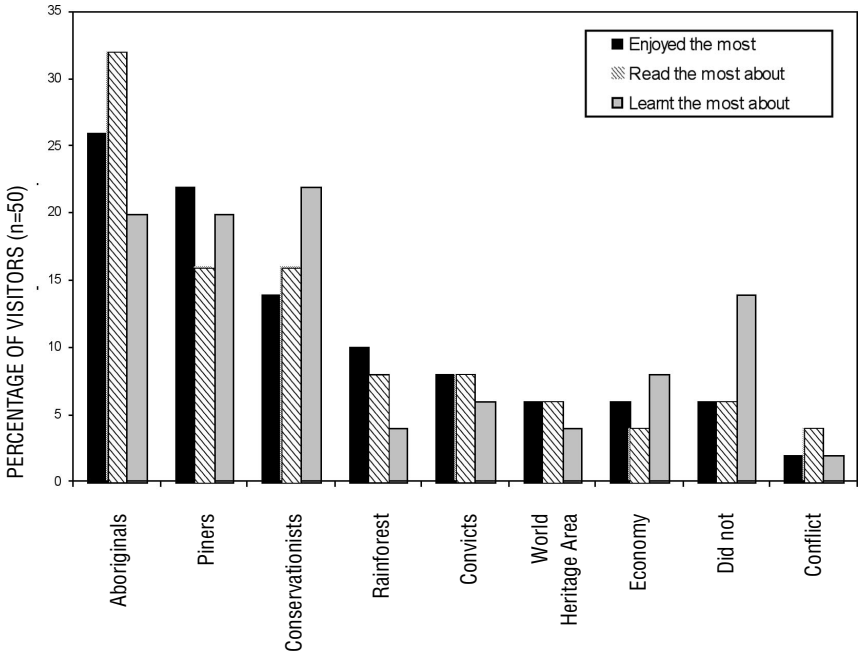


Figure 4.7 The interpretive sub-themes visitors enjoyed, read and learned the most about.

All visitor groups read about Aboriginal people and piners, and single people and couples tended to read most of the displays. Those with children also read most of the displays, although they focused more on the Aboriginal culture and conservationists exhibits (35% equally). Groups were more selective and they either read about the first two

sub-themes presented, Aboriginal culture (60%) and piners history (20%), or they did not read the interpretive text. Age did not appear to influence the amount people read. However, respondents below the age of 29 years of age tended to read the most about Aboriginal people (50%) and visitors across all age groups read about piners and conservationists.

Visitors learned from the interpretive sub-themes. All visitor groups learned from the Aboriginal culture, piners and conservationists exhibits, and couples learned from the greatest number of themes. Learning appeared to increase with group size. For example, 5% of people as part of an adult group and one in four single people indicated having learned nothing. Learning also appeared to increase with education level and here, 75% of respondents who had completed high school learned from the display, and 80% of respondents with matriculation or technical qualifications and nine in ten people with tertiary qualifications said they learned something. Conversely, learning appeared to decrease with increasing age and all respondents younger than 39 years learned from the display, whereas one in four respondents over 50 years learned nothing. In addition, respondents of all ages learned from the piners exhibits; those between 30 and 49 years learned most from the conservationist theme, whereas younger people learned from the Aboriginal culture exhibits.

Interactive elements including: rainforest plants and noises; Aboriginal culture, convict and piners audios; a conservation documentary video; and an operational hydrogenerator form part of the display (Table 4.7). When asked about these interactives, respondents expressed a range of responses and tended to comment more on the exhibits near the display's entrance. All visitors looked at, interacted with, or heard the rainforest and nearly two thirds of these respondents enjoyed this element (62%). However, visitor responses were not as favourable for the other interactives.

For visitors seeing the display, 78% heard the audio presented by Aboriginal community members but only 23% enjoyed it, and 64% indicated they did not or could not hear it. In particular, 75% of adult groups were unable to hear this audio. Similarly for the convict audio, of the 74% of those who heard it, 41% enjoyed the audio and 51% did not hear or were unable to hear it. Due to the larger space and

relatively quieter location, 60% of adult groups indicated enjoying this audio, although 60% of single people didn't stop to listen. Unfortunately, the Piners hut audio was not operational during the survey and thus, respondents were not asked about this element. Fewer visitors indicated having looked at the video documentary or hydrogenerator (60% respectively). Of these, 37% enjoyed the video and 63% did not stop to watch the television. In particular, groups with children avoided this interactive and only 17% indicated having enjoyed it. However, for visitors viewing and operating the hydrogenerator, 77% enjoyed the pump, and three in four respondents less than 39 years of age and half of those over 40 years of age looked at the exhibit. Behavioural mapping confirmed that the hydrogenerator was a popular exhibit (Table 4.1).

Table 4.7 Level of interest and satisfaction in the interactive exhibits.

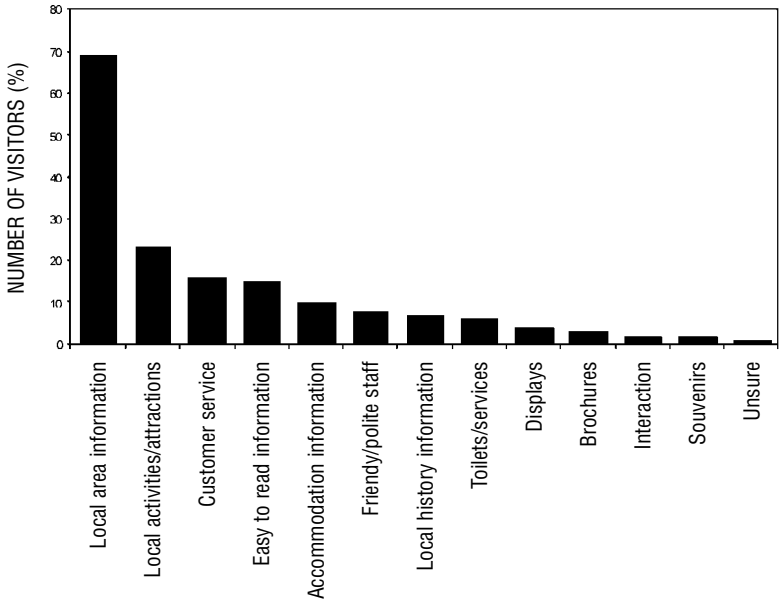
TOTAL SAMPLE (n = 50)	VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Rainforest sounds	Visitors responding	50	100
	Enjoyed it*	31	62
	Didn't enjoy it*	3	6
	Didn't hear it*	16	32
Audio presented by Aboriginal community members	Visitors responding	39	78
	Enjoyed it*	9	23
	Didn't enjoy it*	4	10
	Didn't hear/ couldn't hear*	25	64
	Unsure*	1	3
Convict history audio	Visitors responding	37	74
	Enjoyed it*	15	41
	Didn't enjoy it*	3	8
	Didn't stop/couldn't hear*	19	51
Television documentary	Visitors looked at video	30	60
	Enjoyed it*	11	37
	Didn't enjoy it*	0	0
	Didn't stop/see it*	19	63
Hydrogenerator	Visitors looked at display	30	60
	Enjoyed it*	23	77
	Didn't enjoy it*	0	0
	Didn't operate*	7	23

*Percentage of those visitors responding to the interactive exhibit specified
Interactives recorded in order as they appear in the display

4.2.6 Importance of Visitor Centres to the Holiday Experience

Over 90% of all respondents to the Centre indicated that VCs were either very important or somewhat important to their holiday experience. VCs were important regardless of age, education, where visitors had travelled from, group characteristics, time spent at the Centre, or if visitors saw the display. However, VCs appeared to be somewhat more important to visitors' aged between 40 and 59 years of age. Respondents indicated that information was the single most important element they sought (Figure 4.8). In particular, visitors look for local area information (69%), local activities and attractions (23%), accommodation (10%) and local history (7%). Respondents also identified the importance of staff service and product knowledge (16%), and friendly and polite staff (8%). In addition, respondents sought readable information (15%), an adequate supply of relevant displays (4%), brochures (3%) and souvenirs (2%). Finally, 6% of visitors pointed out the importance of services (including adequate facilities and clean toilets) and social interaction (2%). Only one per cent of visitors were unsure about the important aspects of VCs.

Figure 4.8 What visitors look for in a visitor centre.



When asked about VCs visited in Tasmania, respondents indicated the Cradle Mountain and Port Arthur Visitor Centres were the most frequently visited, followed by the Lake St Clair and Hobart Visitor Information Centres (Table 2.8). One third of respondents indicated they had not visited another Tasmanian VC (33%).

Table 4.8 Other Tasmanian visitor centres accessed by visitors.

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
No other centres visited	83	33
Cradle Mountain	58	23
Port Arthur	58	23
Lake St Clair	51	20
Other	41	16
Hobart	44	17
Bicheno	27	11
Mount Field	23	9
Devonport	19	8

Respondents identified Australian VCs and other international centres that stood out in their mind, what the best features of these centres were and how the SVC compares to that centre(s). In total, respondents identified 35 Australian VCs and 18 international VCs. A summary of these VCs is detailed in Table 4.9. When compared to other centres, the SVC rated reasonably well, although visitors often found the comparison difficult as they felt the SVC was unique. Generally, the SVC compared more favourably with other Australian VCs. However, it was considered smaller, darker, less comprehensive in terms of the services and information, and deficient in some product ranges and varied and interactive displays. Despite this, respondents considered the SVC provided a sense of place and atmosphere, and it is an eco-friendly, visually attractive and relaxed environment. In addition, visitors commented favourably on the amphitheatre.

Table 4.9 A summary of visitor responses regarding other visitor centres.

VISITOR CENTRE	LOCATION	BEST FEATURES	HOW SVC COMPARES
Australian Visitor Centres			
Canberra	ACT	Big, technical, interactive and well laid out with lots of information.	The SVC is more environmentally friendly, but has less information.
Portland	NSW	The Centre has excellent displays.	Different location and feel.
Katoomba (Blue Mountains)	NSW	Excellent location with great views, Centre is interactive and has local information and friendlier staff.	The SVC is different. The location is not as good, however, the amphitheatre rates well.
Katherine Gorge	NT	This large centre blends in with the environment and the information is well displayed.	The SVC is smaller but just as good.
Uluru	NT	Great scenery, location, architecture and use of colours. It is free, clean, spacious, quiet and tactile; it has variety, audios, visual information; and friendly staff.	The SVC is not as well advertised. It is small and dark but has information. Although difficult to compare, this Centre rates reasonably well.
Kakadu	NT	Good interpretation and local area information on the Aboriginal community.	The SVC is different.
Jabiru	NT	The Centre is in touch with the environment, it has more displays and it demonstrates authenticity.	The SVC is smaller and it has less culture.
Cradle Mountain	TAS	Quality displays and free entry.	Paying to see display is a negative.
Lake St Clair	TAS	Good interpretation	This Centre compares well.
Halls Gap	VIC	Great architecture, spacious, natural timbers and all the displays worked.	The SVC is a smaller centre and not all the displays were working.

VISITOR CENTRE	LOCATION	BEST FEATURES	HOW SVC COMPARES
Grampians	VIC	Great architecture, good interpretation on the Aboriginal community, 'hands on' activities and local information.	The Grampians and SVC centres are both unique.
Phillip Island	VIC	Remote location, huge, spacious and interactive – lots of displays, and more local area information.	Different and compares well. Not as comprehensive, smaller, relaxed and lacks interactive displays.
Overseas Visitor Centres			
Galway	Ireland	Built on a wonderful site – it also has a restaurant and great staff.	Different location at Strahan and the surroundings are not as good.
Tokyo	Japan	Well organised, lots of information.	The SVC is a bad second.
Christchurch and other New Zealand Centres	New Zealand	New Zealand centres are reasonably priced, are big and spacious, have realistic displays, lots of information and friendly staff.	The Christchurch and SVC centres are both good as they relate to their region. Although the SVC is smaller, it is compares well.
Oslo	Norway	Visually stunning and architectural.	The SVC is much smaller.
Kruger National Park	South Africa	The Centre is local and non-commercial.	This Centre is wilder and it blends in well with the surroundings.
Serengeti	Tanzania	Clever and artistic building design, it does not provide just information.	The SVC is not as impressive but it is still unique.
English Interpretation Centres	United Kingdom	Very commercial and often kitsch. They generally have a variety of services and efficient helpful staff.	The SVC has a better atmosphere and it fits in with the natural environment.

VISITOR CENTRE	LOCATION	BEST FEATURES	HOW SVC COMPARES
Sorvick (York)	United Kingdom	Very interactive displays – smells, sounds, animation, readings and spoken commentary. It retells local history and recreates settlement – this is a whole day experience.	The SVC is very different – it is smaller, more text based and less expensive.
Grand Canyon United States National Parks	America	Grand Canyon centres are spacious, has big views and a large range of merchandise. USA centres are larger with personalised service and lots of information – set up in a personal way to meet visitor needs.	The SVC is smaller, there is less local area information, the service is not as good and it is harder to find.

5. CASE STUDY EVALUATION

5.1 Themes Emerging from the Study

Overall, a number of themes emerged from the visitor survey and key informant data that were broadly banded into three main categories: (1) management considerations; (2) design elements; and (3) the value of community consultation, participation and support (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Themes emerging from the visitor survey and key informant data.

THEMES EMERGING FROM THE DATA	LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES			DESIGNERS		TOURISM INDUSTRY		COM. GROUP	SVC USERS
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Management considerations									
VCs need to be set within a comprehensive strategy		•	•[3]	•				•	
VCs need to be designed for visitor, management and community needs	•	•	•	•			•		
VCs need to be economic viability	•	•	•	•		•	•		
Effective partnerships are required	•	•	•	•		•			
Political arena is important	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
VCs require multiple functions	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•
Design elements									
Location is important	•	•	•	•					•
VCs need a distinctive design	•	•		•	•				•
VCs need to extend into surrounding environment	•	•	•	•	•	•			•

[3]A comprehensive strategy would be difficult given the diversity of visitor centres and their functions

THEMES EMERGING FROM THE DATA	LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES			DESIGNERS		TOURISM INDUSTRY		COM. GROUP	SVC USERS
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
VCs need to provide information	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
Friendly and informed staff are important							•		•
Good access and signage is important			•	•			•		•
Good services are important		•	•	•			•		•
VCs need to provide memorable experiences		•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Interpretation needs to tell a good story		•	•	•	•			•	•[1]
Interpretation and experiences need to be authentic	•	•[2]	•[2]	•	•[2]			•[2]	•[1]
Value of the community									
Community consultation and participation is important	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	
Local support is important	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Referral by the community is important	•	•				•	•		•

KEY: A - Gerrity; B - Foley; C - Haimes; D - Hepper; E - Flanagan; F - Davey; G - Currant; H - Lehman; I – Visitors to the Strahan Visitor Centre

[1]For those visitors seeing the interpretive display, they commented that it was educational, thought provoking and enjoyable

[2]It depends on how you interpret 'authenticity' and whose opinion is presented

Key informants representing local government, State government agencies and designers were generally aware of many key VC design elements and considerations. In contrast, informants representing the tourism industry focused more specifically upon economic and political issues and visitors directed their attention toward VC design and the experiences gained from their visit. However, a number of issues were important to all groups including the need for VCs to offer multiple functions, good location and design, information, and

memorable and authentic experiences that extend into the surrounding environment. In particular, all groups recognised the value of community participation either in the development or support of VCs. Interestingly, visitors to the SVC and informants from the tourism industry emphasised the need for friendly and informed staff and referral from the local community – themes that were not as widely identified by other informants.

5.2 Strahan as an Eco-tourist Destination

Given the rise of ecotourism, tourists are seeking real experiences that include people and the environment (Woods and Moscardo 1996; Orams 1995; Ballantyne 1995; Nelson 1994). In addition, the SVC's interpretive designer, Flanagan (pers. comm. 2001), argued that Tasmanian tourists are interested in knowing more about the State's environmental, cultural and social issues. This changing eco-consumer sentiment has led to Strahan becoming a popular tourist destination and an important gateway to the Gordon River and TWWHA. Today, tourism is an important industry in Strahan, and although the local community was initially antagonistic towards the town's development as a tourist village, it is alive and prospering.

The SVC plays an important role in Strahan's tourism industry in terms of providing tourist information, cultural activities and interpretation about South West Tasmania. As a result, Flanagan (pers. comm. 2001) claimed that the Centre helped change Strahan's tourism industry; particularly 'when tourist operators belatedly realised' that visitors were interested in the stories presented because they had 'remarkable universal import'. In addition, he stated that the Centre helped the community regain a sense of ownership for their town, as they were able to tell their stories in truthful and challenging ways.

When considering Strahan's tourism success, it is likely that visitor numbers to the SVC will increase and although the facility has been controversial, visitor and community environmental awareness is becoming more sophisticated and receptive to the ideas presented. Consequently, if the SVC is to successfully promote the region and be culturally, economically and environmentally sustainable, it needs to offer the best experiences possible. As a result, this study identified a number of issues relevant to the Centre's viability and these findings

can be applied more widely to other VCs (Fallon 2001). This is because many visitors to the SVC also visit other centres and they seek similar services and activities at these facilities. For example, the visitor survey confirmed that the SVC is part of Tasmania's 'drive-through' experience considering that 98% of respondents visited the Centre whilst on holiday, 90% travelled by private or rental vehicle around the State, and 66% indicated having visited (one or more) other Tasmanian VCs (Tables 4.3; 4.8). Interestingly, over 90% of all respondents indicated that VCs were either very important or somewhat important to their holiday experience, 99% of respondents were able to identify the aspects they find important at any VC and 69% of respondents indicated that they seek local area information (Figure 4.8).

5.3 Visitor Centre Success Criteria

Success criterion contributing to VCs is complex. Tourism consultant, Hepper (pers. comm. 2001) suggested that fundamentally, VCs need to be incorporated into comprehensive, collaborative, cross-agency strategies to ensure they meet the needs of all stakeholders. Foley (pers. comm. 2001), the General Manager for Market and Tourist Development at the State government agency Tourism Tasmania, agreed and added that the location and physical environment are important and facilities should be built where the visitors and attractions are found. In addition, VCs should be multi-dimensional and designed for distinctiveness and fit comfortably within the landscape to ensure a sense of welcome and place is provided (Stewart *et al*. 1998). Moscardo (1999) also recognises the importance of centres meeting visitor needs to ensure that facilities attract their attention and inspire their imagination. Given these factors, Currant (pers. comm. 2001), the Managing Director of The Strahan Village, agreed with Moscardo (1998) and Carter (1997), in that VCs should be assessed by their popularity with visitors. Using this measure, the SVC was successful and this study found that visitors, who were evenly spread across age, sex, and group characteristics, were indeed satisfied with the facility (Tables 4.2; 4.3). In addition, 87% of respondents commented favourably on the building's design and they indicated this was the Centre's best aspect (Table 4.5; Figure 4.5).

Despite visitor satisfaction, the SVC has not been economically sustainable either under Tasmanian State government agency control from 1992 to 1997, or under the current MOU agreement between the State government and TREC. Consequently, this study illustrates that it is not enough to measure a VC's success by its popularity with visitors, and it is important that manager and operator needs are met because ultimately, these bodies subsidise or underwrite facilities. Haimes (pers. comm. 2001), the Visitor Centre Planner and Project Coordinator at the State government agency TPWS, accepted this limitation and conceded that developing and maintaining VCs is difficult 'even with a great deal of community support'. Consequently, before building facilities, it is necessary to establish a clear need for a centre and ascertain if governments, the tourism industry and local communities are committed to being actively involved in its on-going operations. However, Foley (pers. comm. 2001) explained that expecting VCs to be 'commercially sustainable, if run on traditional enterprise models, is unrealistic' and active government involvement or effective partnerships, where organisations or businesses underwrite larger centres, may be required if they are to remain economically sustainable.

The Tasmanian Attractions Study identifies that attractions with more that 50,000 visitors per annum make sustainable profits (Tourism Solutions and Inspiring Place 1999). Using this measure, the SVC has the capacity to be economically sustainable because it attracts a critical visitor mass - estimated by Davey (pers. comm. 2001), TREC's Managing Director, at 82,000 visitors for the year ending 2000. However, the Centre is not viable and many services including the display and information provision run at a loss (Davey pers. comm. 2001). For example, the display only attracts 10,000 visitors per year, and although it charges an entry fee and should offer a lucrative revenue base, it generates limited returns. Consequently, the Centre is subsidised by TREC and from 1997 to 2000, the Company contributed over $AUD200,000 to the facility (Davey pers. comm. 2001).

Given that the Centre fails to meet management and operator needs because it is economically unsustainable as it continues to loose money under the present structure (Davey pers. comm.. 2001; TREC

2000),[3] it is essential that multiple functions are further developed at the facility, to ensure it appeals widely and on-sells services and activities to as many visitors as possible. Foley (pers. comm. 2001) acknowledged that this Centre needs to expand its revenue base, but recognised that service provision may be restricted because the space apportioned to these activities is small, cramped and dark when compared to the large and airy display area. As a result, less than one third of visitors purchased goods (Table 4.4). Foley argued that all VCs face this dilemma, they 'are not viable as stand-alone information or interpretation centres', and a mix of directed functions (including retail) needs to be delivered in appealing settings to attract visitors and provide business.

Considering that this Centre attracts sufficient visitors but continues to be economically unsustainable, other factors must also contribute to its viability. Moscardo (1999) and Grenier *et al*. (1993) provide an insight and suggest that VC experiences should also reflect public attitudes, expectations and consciousness. The Mayor of Tasmania's West Coast region, Gerrity (pers. comm. 2001) agreed, and explained that innovative design and economic viability are essential VC success criteria. However, he also suggested that it is important that governments, designers and operators consider the political arena and local community; ensure that VCs foster community ownership, credibility and referral; and provide a structure where facilities can evolve over time to reflect changing needs.

5.4 The Political Arena

Flanagan (pers. comm. 2001), stated that the Centre was a joint creation between the design team and 'designers, architects, artists, Aboriginal community members, local people and others', as the team wanted 'to pay homage and respect to the community'. Flanagan recalled that some members of Strahan's community were involved in the Centre's design and he aimed for the building and interpretation to show 'their world as dirty, scruffy, rusty, steamy, and beautiful as it actually is'. However, he considered that State

[3] For the 1999-2000 year, the SVC activity statement records a total income of $AUD82,808, with total expenditure at $AUD92,029 (TREC 2000). In addition, volunteer staffing provided by TREC's operators over the last three years to 2000 is estimated at $AUD135,000. From 1997-2000, TREC's operators have also provided a direct cash contribution to the SVC of $AUD73,491.

government agencies involved with the Centre's construction did not see it in a creative light, but as 'an exercise of bureaucratic politics'. Consequently, the facility attracted criticism from government and members of the local community who disagreed with the design and interpretive intent, and although the design team was pressured to make changes, it refused to meet these groups needs. In response to the criticisms, Flanagan recollected that a 'crazy alliance' did form in support of the Centre that included the Traditional Recreational Land Use Group, West Coast Council, Gay Law Reform Committee and the Aboriginal community.

Given the controversy surrounding the Centre, Flanagan (pers. comm. 2001) suggested the TPWS will not encourage similar developments in the future. In doing so the State government may continue to 'waste taxpayer's money' because government agencies may stifle interpretive creativity and repeat the same stories in unauthentic, mediocre and superficial ways (Flanagan pers. comm. 2001). Gerrity (pers. comm., 2001) agreed that power relations affected many outcomes at the Centre. However, he suggested that it was not only the State government who imposed its perceptions of the area in the Centre rather than the facility reflecting the community's views, but also the design team and tourism industry from outside the West Coast region. Gerrity considered that the West Coast community was generally not invited to become involved with either the design or construction of the Centre and consequently, the 'architecture, interpretation and politics surrounding the Centre's development … were controversial from the project's beginning' (Gerrity pers. comm., 2001). As a result, he argued that the Centre has not been well accepted by those living on Tasmania's West Coast, although it is more accepted today - if only as 'a liability which at least is doing no harm'.

5.5 Value Community, Cultural and Social Capital

Gerrity (pers. comm. 2001) and Currant (pers. comm. 2001) thought the SVC must be considered in relation to the attitudes of, and the support provided by, all Tasmanian West Coast communities. They stated that many of the Centre's problems stem from the communities' antagonism toward it, as some members from these communities feel that outsiders built and now operate the facility. In

addition, Flanagan (pers. comm. 2001) recalled that after the Centre opened, the State government did not promote or back the facility and this resulted in the wider community further restricting its support. Gerrity (pers. comm. 2001) agreed and identified the following:

- Tasmanian West Coast communities were not adequately informed of the benefits the Centre would bring to the region;

- the Centre does not enhance the community's credibility, nor does it reflect the heart, personality, pride and humour of South West Tasmania; and

- the interpretation does not tell the true stories of the community, nor does it capture the psychology or synergy of Strahan as a working town, a fishing community or an operational port.

This case study demonstrates the importance of encouraging and inspiring local communities to participate in designing and operating VCs because ultimately, these groups provide referral, and cultural and social integrity. The visitor survey suggests that, although government and others perceive that the local community may not fully support the Centre, the community does to some extent refer visitors to the facility. In total, 18% of respondents were referred locally to the facility and 11.5% learnt of the Centre from tourism information including local information (Table 4.4). This implies that if the local community were more supportive, even more visitors may be encouraged to use the facility. Conversely, if the community withdraws their support from the Centre, the facility may become increasingly culturally and economically unsustainable - an outcome that could eventuate despite overall visitor satisfaction.

Although the SVC has been both supported and rejected by Tasmanian West Coast communities with great feeling since its construction, the controversy could be positively harnessed to present contemporary stories. The inclusion of these communities in the development of current activities provides a chance for re-appraising the Centre's opportunities, and it creates new avenues for on-going events and interpretation. Re-empowering the community in the Centre's development would assist in re-establishing a shared vision of

the region's heritage and culture, developing a distinctive regional tourism product and creating new visitor experiences. Trotter (1999), Ballantyne and Uzzell (1999) and Taylor (1995) suggest that this approach fosters social capital and respects the diversity of a community's values. In addition, it promotes cultural pride and reconciliation (James 1999) by allowing different groups to 'acknowledge and appreciate the interconnectedness of their history' (Ballantyne 1995:16). However, Foley (pers. comm. 2001) pointed out that it may be difficult for the SVC to move forward from its current position and the State government will need to foster and nurture the consultation process.

It is important to value community, cultural and social capital because governments or design consultants may not have the knowledge, understanding or opportunity to experience the values of that place to be presented or interpreted. In an effort to promote community consultation, governments need to identify communities of people (whether they are local or state-wide) who have an interest in a facility, or who are instrumental in defining the values of that place. Given that values are social constructions, the engagement of people who are part of the area and who generate those values is essential to a centre's success. As a result, if communities are expected to provide support and referral to VCs, governments and operators need to consider their needs and motivations.

Flanagan (pers. comm. 2001) provided an alternative view. He considered that honouring community, cultural and social capital 'is achieved by focusing thought, love and creativity on whatever you discover about a place or people', and not through the 'nonsense of endless consensus, the lie of community consultation'. According to Flanagan, this is because such processes result in a few powerful, generally reactionary and sclerotic voices being heard rather than the 'pulse of the community'. As a result, he stated that he 'never claimed to speak for anybody' other than himself at the SVC, and he questioned who can claim to represent any community. This is an important point, as difficulties arise when deciding which members of the local community will be represented or who should present the community vision. In addition, planners and designers need to define what comprises a local community and whether a local or regional approach should be adopted. With regard to the SVC, eliciting the

local community's support appears to have been insufficient and it may have been appropriate to have sought assistance and referral more widely, by extending the 'local community' to include others on Tasmania's West Coast.

5.6 Authentic Experiences

James (1999), Uzzell and Ballantyne (1998) and Flanagan (1996) identify that VCs need to present authentic experiences. Lehman (pers. comm. 2001), the Aboriginal Planning Officer at the TPWS, agreed that interpretation needs to be delivered authentically, although he warned that difficulties arise when defining the meaning of 'authenticity' as he considered that it is can be 'a political term'. In reality, there is no objective element called 'authenticity' that stands out independent of social and political analysis or an individual's value system. What is authentic to one person may not be to another. Consequently, authenticity relates to experience and it depends on each person's individual perspective. As a result, it is difficult to provide interpretation that is representative of a people or community, and designers need to identify whose authenticity they are depicting and deliver experiences or interpret stories that are relevant and accurate. Ultimately, authenticity 'must be of the place or relate to place' and to achieve successful outcomes, research is required to test authentic experiences 'against market perceptions' (Foley pers. comm. 2001).

Lehman (pers. comm. 2001) stated that the Aboriginal community reconciles issues of authenticity by presenting elements as stories. For example, when the community elected body, the TALC undertakes interpretation, it represents the community by presenting cultural generalisations. However, Lehman also identified the importance of telling individual stories. Stories are not presented with the objective of trying to be representative of the whole community because there are huge arrays of indigenous experiences. However, collectively these individual experiences make up a diverse community and a more holistic account.

Flanagan (pers. comm. 2001) agreed with the view of Ham and Krumpe (1996), that a well-articulated theme expresses a belief. Flanagan considered he tried to show the truth as he found it at the

SVC and 'this is all any designer can hope to achieve'. Consequently, he stated that interpretation should be signed like books or films because interpretive ownership would encourage excellence and the audience should know its creator. According to Flanagan, this approach 'provides the visitor an opportunity to say well - that's their point of view and I have a different one'. He felt that 'rather than appeasing all communities and presenting accepted and sanitised misnomers, communities should reach for something more fundamental' and feel confident to present authenticity and truth as they see it.

For new Tasmanian VCs, Flanagan (pers. comm. 2001) hoped the State government will allow people to tell the truth in challenging, provoking and interesting ways. He stated the importance of recognising that it is possible to evoke the visitor's imagination by telling lies, but fundamentally, interpretation should be truthful. Whilst Flanagan thought the SVC attempts to present true Tasmanian stories, he considered that the State's tourism industry has been ideological and it has not been truthful at other tourist attractions. Consequently, he argued that the industry fails to acknowledge the State's complex and bitter past and it presents 'a cosy image of Tasmania', but in reality 'it is an extraordinary place and extraordinary things have happened here'.

5.7 Interpreting Aboriginal Culture

Lehman (pers. comm. 2001) pointed out that 'Aboriginal interpretation is a little different to many other interpretive areas'. As such, this interpretation covers real and contemporary issues that affect the present (Ballantyne 1995). In terms of heritage and culture, Lehman explained that like society, the Aboriginal community's attitudes have changed and in some cases communities have become more liberal and relaxed. Therefore, their interpretation should be reflected as an ongoing entity that is evolving over time. With this in mind, Lehman identified that the Aboriginal community's interpretation is more appropriate when presenting issues that are already in the public domain or matters that the Aboriginal community initiates.

When interpreting the Aboriginal peoples' culture, governments and designers need to consult with the Aboriginal community. This process depends on the Aboriginal community's available resources and although interpretation is 'very important … as it is an investment in the future in terms of modifying public perceptions and understanding' Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council (TALC) needs to balance interpretation with its other commitments (Lehman pers. comm. 2001). Consequently, some work may need to be commenced by State government agencies. However, Lehman pointed out that agencies need 'to recognise the Aboriginal communities' right in participating as early as it wants to or as it sees appropriate, in the planning and design processes.

Haimes (pers. comm. 2001) explained that the TPWS are obliged to undertake consultation when developing interpretation that represents the Aboriginal community or controversial events, and that 'by and large' this process works well. Lehman (pers. comm. 2001) considered that consultation between TALC and the TPWS was improving, although it is not happening as successfully as it should. He stated that while consultation occurs earlier than in the past, it does not happen early enough in the planning process. Consequently, stakeholders agree that community consultation is valuable. However, there are mixed perceptions regarding the success of the process and State government agencies may need to ask other stakeholders whether consultation is meeting their needs.

James (1999) and Bates (1992) identify that inadequate consultation results in inappropriate issues or images being presented, or the story being presented in the wrong place. Lehman (pers. comm. 2001) agreed, and stated that problems occur when interpretive themes focus on 'the rendition of visual images', or they highlight issues about the concept of wilderness as a land empty of people, a land unspoiled by people. However, the term wilderness is becoming more sophisticated and Lehman thought the Aboriginal community is more confident in working with the re-definition of this concept as areas that have not been affected by mechanised access and industrialisation, and have been, or are, populated.

5.8 Interpretation - Valuable Lessons

The re-definition of wilderness is reflected at the SVC and interpretation representing the Aboriginal community was successfully installed after consultation with the Aboriginal community. According to Flanagan (pers. comm. 2001), the interpretation recognises that people lived in South West Tasmania for up to 32,000 years, and he considered the display's success is due to the stories presented reflecting real issues that affect visitors personally. He argued that if 'you deal with anything in a particular place it becomes fascinating because of conflict and certain darkness … this is what people want to hear'. Consequently, Flanagan stated that he pro-actively and politically used 'hot' interpretation to convey real Tasmanian stories and foster community development.

Flanagan's views and interpretive style are consistent with Ballantyne and Uzzell (1999), Serrell (1996) and Ham (1992) who suggest that 'hot' interpretation and constructivist interpretive approaches be taken, where personal connections and cognitive conflict challenge and encourage visitor emotions to facilitate learning, mindfulness and overall satisfaction. In this sense, Uzzell and Ballantyne (1998:154) argue that 'hot' interpretation 'appreciates the need for and injects an affective component into its subject matter' to arouse an emotional response, and cognitive conflict presents visitors with new knowledge, attitudes, values or behaviours which are incompatible with their present understandings. Trotter (1999) adds that 'hot' interpretation can also be used to foster social capital. However, Lehman (pers. comm. 2000) warned that 'hot' interpretation is relevant to the setting, and it is important to consult with people and communities to ensure that all sensitivities are addressed. Consequently, cultural, controversial or conflicting interpretation may be more successfully developed if it is presented as a collection of stories, as this approach may result in the delivery of more authentic and holistic community or regional accounts.

Moscardo (1999) suggests that telling a good story is a critical interpretive success factor. Foley (pers. comm. 2001) and Hepper (pers. comm. 2001) agreed, and stated that interpretive stories are stronger when they present a holistic picture. In addition, the most

significant findings for visitors seeing the display were that 88% felt it told a good story and 92% were happy having paid to see the exhibits. This is interesting, considering that over one quarter of visitors not seeing the display regarded the $AUD3.30 entry fee as too expensive. Therefore, this study found that visitors seeing the display were more likely to be satisfied if it told a good story.

Haimes (pers. comm. 2001) considered the SVC is 'an unusual situation … in that the stories were designed to be provocative' and the TPWS does not currently use this approach. Haimes' view is relevant, because although visitors commented favourably on the Centre and its interpretation; and consultation with the Aboriginal community and other cultural groups was 'conducted successfully for its time' (Lehaman pers. comm. 2001; Flanagan pers. comm. 2001); State government agencies and the local community continue to feel disfranchised from the facility (Gerrity pers. comm. 2001).

Consequently, the Centre is accepted by some, but it continues to attract criticism from its ongoing support base – governments and the local community (as reflected by the key informants). This implies that VC success is largely dependent upon comprehensive government, industry and community consultation, and the inclusion of these groups' needs in a facility's operations. Ballantyne and Uzzell (1999) agree, and suggest that all stakeholders should be incorporated into the planning process to ensure the purpose and elements of the facility, and the stories and presentation techniques are negotiated with, rather than imposed upon, the community. If this process is inadequate or breaks down, communities may become disenfranchised and antagonistic if they feel their stories have been misrepresented or given away for the sake of value adding the tourism product. When considering these issues, VCs should offer some tangible community development and it is important for governments and the tourism industry to consider the needs of cultural and local communities to ensure positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Elements Contributing to Visitor Centre Excellence

This study successfully investigated key issues relevant to planning, designing and evaluating effective and sustainable VCs; and analysed visitors to the SVC to determine: (i) who used the Centre (ii) how visitors used the Centre (iii) what visitors thought of the Centre (iv) and what impacts the Centre had on users.

This study found a number of valid conclusions appropriate to the single case. However, the study also identified a number of key elements that may contribute to effective and sustainable VCs generally including the following.

- **Identify the need for, and function of, any new centre** – once the need has been established, it is important to understand the market, the types of visitors likely to access the VC and the function and role of the facility.

- **Understand the audience(s)** – to meet visitor, management and community needs. This is because VC sustainability includes economic factors, as well as political, social, cultural, spiritual and environmental considerations.

- **Clearly identify resources** – is the VC is to be self-, partly-, or fully funded? If it is to be self-supporting the facility requires a critical visitor mass and the right selection of visitors who will buy products and provide an economic base.

- **Foster effective partnerships** – where active State government agency involvement or the tourism industry underwrites a centre, and the local community provides assistance and referral.

- **Consider ongoing operational and maintenance costs** – and those who will provide the resources need to be determined during the planning stage.

- **Value social, community and cultural capital** – local and cultural community ownership and participation in the design and operation of VCs is essential because ultimately, communities provide ongoing support.

- **Provide personal experiences** – because visitors seek experiences that are real, intimate and friendly.

- **Develop multiple functions** – because a mix of activity and revenue bases is required to appeal for as wide an audience as possible. These functions need to be targeted to ensure they m*eet a*ll stakeholders needs.

- **Promote and market the facility** – to ensure that visitors are aware of the VC. Signage in and around the Centre (or around the township) should be clear, concise and effective and a variety of marketing strategies should be employed.

- **Choose the location carefully** – and build the VCs where the attraction and visitors are found. VCs need to fit comfortably within the setting, provide a sense of place in the landscape and consider the audience's needs.

- **Visible and accessible entrances are essential** – because they provide a sense of welcome and orientate visitors to a site or activity. Entrances should entice visitors to explore and provide some advance suggestion of what is to follow.

- **Provide distinct and innovative designs** – because VCs need to inspire the imagination and provide a presence rather than mimic or replicate the setting.

- **Create distinct and authentic experiences** – which are of the place or relate to the place, and are relevant and accurate for people and communities.

- **Present important messages at the beginning of the experience** – to ensure that visitors absorb new information while they are inspired and receptive.

- **Interstitial experiences are important** – synergy and linkages between the VC and the landscape are particularly important, and planners should harness these areas to draw visitors from the environment into the facility and from the facility back into the environment.

- **Be innovative** – because visitors seek new, distinct and interesting experiences. Designers and operators need to be innovative in the way they 'do business'.

- **Design a facility that evolves over time** – any attraction needs to constantly change its information, activities and interpretation to keep the VC current, fresh and innovative. Relevant historical content can be kept, but new elements should be included.

6.2 Elements Contributing to Interpretive Excellence

VCs often provide interpretation and this study identified that telling a good story is an essential interpretive success factor. In addition, interpretation and other interactive experiences can foster social capital and provide an opportunity for respecting the diversity of a community's values. As such, communities can be represented through interpretation that is made up of a collection of stories and together, these individual experiences can then make up a more holistic account. However, interpretation also needs to be provided in different ways and offer alternative experiences to ensure it appeals to as wide an audience as possible. This study found that interpretive experiences need to be:

- **Authentic** – interpretation should be credible, clear and related to the essence of that place. Given the rich culture and natural environment offered by many settings, interpreters should build on these elements rather than importing exotic ideas from elsewhere.

- **Entertaining** – interpretation should capture people's imagination, it should be fun and visitors should be enriched by the experience.

- **Personal** – stories should be communicated in a personal way as people remember these experiences far more than traditional museum encounters.

- **A learning experience** – clear messages should come through the interpretation that is related to the type of place you wish to present to others. These messages should not be in conflict with the communities of that place and the messages should leave a lasting impression.

- **Community focused** – interpretation will always be stronger with local involvement. The community ought to be involved through the process and outcomes and planners need to develop more effective ways of defining and involving communities in the design and delivery of interpretation.

6.3 New Directions for the Strahan Visitor Centre

This study found that 76% of visitors to the SVC of visitors were Australians travelling mostly from Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland and 16% of visitors were overseas tourists. Visitors were generally between 30 and 49 years of age and 68% had completed tertiary qualifications. Over 85% of visitors commented favourably about the Centre and over 90% indicated that VCs in general are important to their holiday experience. Whilst at the Centre, 75% of visitors sought information or came to browse and they indicated that information on what to do in the local area was an essential VC function. At the SVC, the display was less popular than the provision of information and only 20% of visitors paid to see this attraction.

The SVC was generally effective in terms of providing multiple functions; distinct and innovative experiences; interstitial experiences that link the Centre to the surrounding environment; and interpretation that was authentic, entertaining personal and educational. In addition, the Centre excelled in providing tourist information. However, the SVC was less effective in a number of ways including the lack of signage and marketing of the facility; concealed and restricted entrances; an inadequate information foyer in terms of size, function and lighting; a number of outdated displays; and interpretation that failed to present all the local community's stories

including Strahan's maritime history, the fishing community, mining, coastal ecology and fauna. In addition, it is questionable as to whether the SVC is economically sustainable as it is loosing money and being subsidised in terms of direct financial support and voluntary labour by the current operators. This point is highlighted by Gerrity (pers. comm. 2001), Foley (pers. comm. 2001) and Hepper (pers. comm. 2001) who stated that the personal input provided by Davey (TREC) was vital to the Centre's success and he is an asset to Strahan's tourism product. In addition, only 20% of those visiting the Centre paid to see the display despite this area occupying more that 80% of the building. Finally, a number of key informants considered that more effort needs to be directed towards fostering community and industry support for the Centre to ensure continued local input and referral to the facility. The study identified the following initiatives to improve the SVC'c economic, social and cultural viability.

- **Retain the Centre** – because what some Tasmanians revile today may become tomorrow's icon.

- **Develop a clear State government agency objective** – to foster support and ensure that functions and messages are targeted in a strategic manner.

- **Acknowledge the real costs** – associated with providing tourist services, particularly during winter. Governments may need to acknowledge the significant costs of providing these services and offer assistance. Multiple functions may also need to be expanded.

- **Improve promotion, signage and on-site visitor orientation** – as the entrances to the building and the display are obscured and lack presence. As a result, they need to be made more visible and signage into the building and display needs to be improved. In addition, the State government and the tourism industry may wish to consider producing a professional brochure to present the Strahan/West Coast attractions to visitors.

- **Promote the play and display** – because the play and display both present a significant opportunity to attract more patrons and increase revenue. In addition, it is important to provide interpretation that is current, innovative and varied.

- **Foster greater community support** – the inclusion of West Coast communities in the development of current interpretive stories would provide an opportunity for re-appraising the Centre's interpretive opportunities and creating new and on-going interpretation.

- **Develop additional interstitial experiences** – to create linkages between the Centre, Macquarie Harbour, the main precinct and the landscape. Interstitial experiences could also be extended into the main precinct in an effort to attract visitors to the Centre.

6.4 Reflections

Although the SVC was selected as an extreme case, this research found that many issues affecting this facility have universal application. This case study illustrates that VCs are not viable if they are only popular with visitors, and any facility has the potential to become controversial or unsustainable if it fails to meet the needs, and elicit the support, of all stakeholders. As a result, it is important that stakeholders actively and publicly support VCs – from their inception through to their operation. Unfortunately, there is no prescriptive formula by which to plan VCs and they need to be constructed on a case-by-case basis to ensure all relevant needs are accommodated. However, interpretive VCs should be authentic, entertaining, personal, a learning experience and community focused, because interpretation will always be stronger with local involvement.

The argument that interpretive VCs offer effective mechanisms for supporting and managing tourism is ambitious. The reality of rapidly growing tourist numbers causes some authors to caution that self education and visitor regulation are rarely sufficient in achieving adequate standards in terms of cultural, social and environmental protection. However, whilst understanding these criticisms, it would be inappropriate to discount VCs as possible solutions for enhancing quality visitor experiences, providing tourist information and managing visitor impacts. Therefore, providing information to tourists and influencing their behaviour requires a truly inter-disciplinary approach where VCs provide one important facet of an overarching tourist information and environmental education strategy.

The debate remains as to whether VCs should be visitor, management, business or community focused. Whether they are publicly owned, private ventures or operated under MOU or concessionaire agreements, VCs can contribute significantly to society's cultural and environmental capital. Considering that tourists are seeking authentic experiences and VCs exist to serve the public, it is important that commercial imperatives do not compromise these facilities or the values presented within them. Consequently, all stakeholders need to be included in the planning, design and operation of VCs where the consultation process is negotiated with the community. This approach ensures that facilities meet management, visitor, the tourism industry, local community and cultural group needs. In addition, given that one of the overarching messages presented by VCs is minimising environmental impact, it is important that stakeholders consider and evaluate the potential impact of the facility itself. Ultimately, if VCs ask visitors to respect and care for the community and environment, the facility itself must take a lead and do likewise.

As a result, further research will assist those seeking to build VCs to determine their role and function. In this study, three main categories emerged in the visitor survey and key informant data that require additional research: (1) management considerations; (2) design elements; and (3) the value of community consultation, participation and support (Table 5.1). In particular, comprehensive, collaborative, cross-agency tourism and interpretation strategies need to be developed to ensure that VCs are built within a regional vision and interpretation is unique and distinctive at each location. Without these strategies, VCs may become compromised and focus on individual government agency or operator objectives and interests, rather than the needs of all stakeholders.

In addition, few studies have determined what constitutes an authentic VC experience or compared the effectiveness of VC interpretation with interpretive experiences that are either presented in-situ or personally through guided activities. Research could also be directed towards identifying what benefits intermediate interpretive experiences (those linking the built structure with the surrounding environment) provide in creating a sense of place for both visitors and the local community. Furthermore, VCs need to change over time to

reflect changing community attitudes and research is required to determine how this can be successfully achieved. Few studies have assessed community perceptions towards VCs. If interpretive VCs are to actively conserve natural environments and sustain the well-being of local people and communities, research is needed to determine how communities can become involved in planning and operating these facilities. Finally, the success of VCs should not only be measured in terms of meeting visitor needs or the tourism industry. Given that these facilities should also meet the needs of management, local communities and cultural groups, they ought to be assessed with these stakeholders in mind.

This research has attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of the SVC and the researchers found that a multi-method research approach was an appropriate technique to complete the study's aims as it provided comprehensive insights into all issues affecting the Centre. However, the researchers found that the key informant interviews elicited the most useful information in terms of knowledge and resources. In addition, it was the outcomes from the key informant interviews that could be applied more generally to other VCs. Despite this, a number of key findings came from the on-site visitor survey including the value of VCs to the overall visitor experience, the need for VCs to provide information on what to do in the local area and the popularity of displays depicting Aboriginal culture. Given that Australia is currently constructing many new VCs, this study highlights the importance of evaluating these centres to ensure they provide effective, authentic, innovative and economically viable information, services and interpretation. As a result, this study provides an effective framework by which other VCs can be assessed.

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PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

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APPENDIX A: STRAHAN VISITOR CENTRE SURVEY

UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA
STRAHAN VISITOR CENTRE SURVEY: JANUARY 2001

<table>
<tr><td>1. Interview ID</td><td rowspan="2">5. Weather (CIRCLE)
1. Sunny
2. Overcast
3. Rain</td><td rowspan="2">7. How many people in the group (CIRCLE AND MARK)
1. Single
2. Couple (1 other adult)
3. Adult group (>2 adults)
4. Adult group with children (>2 adults)
5. Family (with children)
No in group _____
No of children _____</td></tr>
<tr><td>2. Interviewer's Name</td></tr>
<tr><td>3. Date</td><td rowspan="2">6. Female / Male (CIRCLE)</td><td rowspan="2">8. Is there anyone in the group with mobility problems? (walking aid, additional assistance, wheelchair) (MARK) ;
No. of people _____</td></tr>
<tr><td>4. Time Commenced</td></tr>
</table>

Good morning, afternoon, evening.
My name is *Liza* (GIVE SURNAME) from the Tasmanian Market Research Firm of EMRS. We've been asked to complete a survey to find out whether you have enjoyed your visit to the Strahan Visitor Centre and I wonder whether you would mind answering a few questions for me please. This will only take around 10 minutes.

PROMPT ONLY IF THE RESPONDENT REQUIRES ADDITIONAL INFORMATION.
The University of Tasmania is conducting this study and your input will help to understand the best and worst elements of this centre, to ensure that any new Tasmanian visitor information centres incorporate only the best possible design.

IF THE RESPONDENT REFUSES FILL IN THE REFUSAL TABLE (PROVIDED AS A SEPARATE ATTACHMENT). PLEASE CONTINUE IF RESPONDENT AGREES.

ASK ALL RESPONDENTS	**RESPONSE**
1. Have you visited the Strahan Visitor Centre before? (CIRCLE)	Yes. GO TO Q2 No. GO TO Q3
2. When did you last visit the centre? (DAYS)	……..(days) On last trip (PROBE: WHEN WAS THAT?)
3. Where did you find out about the centre? (CIRCLE OR RECORD) (PROMPT IF REQUIRED)	Discovered the centre on arrival Referred by someone in Strahan From signs in Strahan Tourist brochure/information Newspaper/magazine article Other (specify)
4. Why did you decide to visit this Centre? (CIRCLE OR RECORD) (PROMPT IF REQUIRED – MORE THAN ONE RESPONSE POSSIBLE)	Find visitor information Visit the interpretive display Book visitor accommodation Book a tour/activity See the play Something to do Other (specify)
5. Did you find the information you were looking for? (CIRCLE)	Yes. GO TO Q7 Just browsing. GO TO Q7 No. GO TO Q6
6. What information didn't you find … (PLEASE RECORD)	
7. How long did you spend at the Centre? (MINUTES)	< 5 minutes 5 – 15 minutes 15 – 30 minutes 30 – 45 minutes 45 – 60 minutes > 60 minutes

8. Did you look at the display in the centre? (CIRCLE AND PROMPT IF REQUIRED: THE DISPLAY YOU PAID TO SEE)	Yes. GO TO Q10 No. GO TO Q9
9. Why didn't you look at the display? (CIRCLE OR RECORD) GO TO QUESTION 24	Too expensive Didn't know it was there Didn't know what it was Didn't entice me to enter Wasn't interested Didn't have time Already experienced area in 'real life' Other (specify)
ASK ONLY THOSE RESPONDENTS WHO SAW THE DISPLAY	
I would now like to ask you some questions about the display. The display has a number of Tasmanian themes including:	
1. Rainforest vegetation 2. Aboriginals 3. Convicts 4. Piners 5. Industry (mining, forestry and tourism)	6. Conservationists 7. Conflict 8. The World Heritage Area 9. Didn't read/didn't like/didn't learn
10. What three themes in the display did you read the most about? (RECORD UP TO THREE NUMBERS [1 TO 8] FROM THE ABOVE LIST)	
11. Which three themes in the display did you like the most? (RECORD UP TO THREE NUMBERS [1 TO 8] FROM THE ABOVE LIST)	
12. Did you learn anything from the displays? (CIRCLE)	Yes. GO TO Q13 No. GO TO Q14

13. If you did, which three themes did you learn the most from … (RECORD UP TO THREE NUMBERS [1 TO 8] FROM THE ABOVE LIST)	
14. Now that you have been through the display, could you describe how it makes you feel? (PLEASE RECORD VERBATIM)	
15. Would you say the display … (CIRCLE AND PROMPT)	Told a good story Did not tell a good story Unsure
16. What did you think about the rainforest sounds … (CIRCLE)	I enjoyed it Didn't enjoy it Didn't hear it It was too loud Unsure
17. Which of the following themes did you look at? (CIRCLE – MORE THAN ONE RESPONSE POSSIBLE – ASK ONLY THE CORRESPONDING QUESTION[S])	Aboriginals. GO TO Q18 Convicts. GO TO Q19 The suburban bungalow. GO TO Q20 Hydropower generation. GO TO Q21
NOW I WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU ABOUT AN ASPECT OF THIS THEME (OR THESE THEMES). (FROM Q17)	
18. What did you think about the aboriginal audio … (CIRCLE – PROMPT IF REQUIRED)	Enjoyed it Didn't enjoy it Didn't stop to listen Weren't able to listen Unsure
19. What did you think about the convict audio … (CIRCLE – PROMPT IF REQUIRED)	Enjoyed it Didn't enjoy it Didn't stop to listen Weren't able to listen Unsure

20. What did you think about the television documentary in the living room? (CIRCLE – PROMPT IF REQUIRED)	Enjoyed it Didn't enjoy it Didn't stop to see it Wasn't able to see it Unsure
21. What did you think about operating the hydro generator? (CIRCLE – PROMPT IF REQUIRED)	Enjoyed it Didn't enjoy it Didn't operate the generator Didn't operate generator, but still enjoyed it Unsure
22. Would you like to make any other comments on the display? (CIRCLE OR RECORD)	No comments Other (specify)
23. Were you happy paying to see the display? (CIRCLE)	Yes No, too expensive No, entry should have been free Unsure

ASK ALL RESPONDENTS

24. I would now like to ask you some questions about the building and services. I'd like you to give me a score out of 10 where 1 is very poor and 10 is excellent about the services.
(CIRCLE OR MARK IF UNABLE TO SAY – ROTATE ORDER MENTIONED)

	Can't say	Very poor									Excellent
The friendliness of the staff		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The provision of local information		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The effectiveness of the booking service		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The building's design		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The toilets		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

25. Overall, how would you rate this centre in a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 is very poor to 10 exceptional)? (CIRCLE)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
26. Is there anything at this centre that could be improved? (PLEASE RECORD VERBATIM AND PROBE IF REQUIRED: CAN YOU THINK OF ANYTHING ELSE THAT MIGHT IMPROVE THIS CENTRE)	
27. Have you visited any other visitor centres in Tasmania? (CIRCLE – MORE THAN ONE RESPONSE POSSIBLE)	No other centres visited Cradle Mountain Lake St Clair Port Arthur Mount Field Geeveston Forest Centre Other (Specify)
28. Does any other visitor centre or tourist attraction that you have been to anywhere in the world stand out in your mind? (RECORD OR CIRCLE)	A centre/attraction that stands out is _____ _____ GO TO Q29 No other centre/attraction visited. GO TO Q31
29. What is it about this centre or attraction that makes it stand out? (PLEASE RECORD)	
30. Could you briefly say how the Strahan centre compares with the centre or attraction you have just described? (PLEASE RECORD)	
31. Could you briefly tell me what you generally look for in a visitor centre? (PLEASE RECORD)	

32. How important are visitor centres to your holiday experience? (CIRCLE AND PROMPT – WOULD YOU SAY THEY ARE …)	Very important Somewhat important Neither important nor unimportant Not very important Very unimportant Unsure
33. Did you purchase any items at the centre? (CIRCLE AND RECORD)	Yes. GO TO Q34 No. GO TO Q35
34. What did you purchase? (PLEASE RECORD)	
35. Did you see the play "The Ship that Never Was"? (CIRCLE)	Yes. GO TO Q36 No. GO TO Q37
36. How would you rate the play on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 is very poor and 10 exceptional). (CIRCLE)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
37. For you, what was the best thing about the Visitor Centre? (PLEASE RECORD VERBATIM)	
I WOULD NOW LIKE TO ASK YOU SOME GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR TRIP.	
38. On this trip have you visited or do you intend to visit the following places? (CIRCLE IF THEY HAVE VISITED OR MARK IF THEY INTEND TO VISIT) (PROMPT – MORE THAN ONE RESPONSE POSSIBLE)	**Place May visit** Gordon River/Sarah Island 1. Cradle Mountain 2. Lake St Clair 3. Mount Field 4. The Huon Area 5. World Heritage Area 6. Freycinet Peninsula 7. Port Arthur 8.
39. How many days all together on this trip will you spend in Strahan? (DAYS)	____ (days). GO TO Q40 I live in Strahan. GO TO Q46

40. What is your main reason for visiting Strahan? (CIRCLE OR RECORD – PROMPT IF REQUIRED)	Holiday Visiting friends and relatives Business Other (specify)
41. How many days all together on this trip will you spend in Tasmania? (DAYS)	____ (days). GO TO Q42 I live in Tasmania. GO TO Q44
42. What is your main reason for visiting Tasmania? (CIRCLE OR RECORD – PROMPT IF REQUIRED)	Holiday Visiting friends and relatives Business Other (specify)
43. Have you been to Tasmania before? (CIRCLE)	Yes No
44. What is your mode of transport? (CIRCLE AND PROMPT IF REQUIRED)	Private Car Rental Car Coach Tour Hitch Hiked Other (specify)
FINALLY, I WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOURSELF.	
45. What is your post code in Australia or country of origin (PLEASE RECORD)	
46. Please could I ask your age? (YEARS)	
47. What is the highest level of education that you have completed? (CIRCLE)	High School (up to year 10) Matriculation (up to year 12) Technical qualification (Trade or TAFE certificate) Tertiary (university Bachelor, Post Graduate or Diploma study)

Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions. Just to remind you that my name is *Liza* (GIVE SURNAME) from the research firm EMRS. If you have any questions about the survey the University of Tasmania can be phoned on 6225 3410.

I certify that this interview has been fully and accurately recorded according to the ESOMAR Code of Professional Behaviour.

_____ INTERVIEWER	_____ DATE
_____ TIME COMPLETED	_____ TIME TAKEN

APPENDIX B: STRAHAN VISITOR CENTRE OBSERVATIONS CHECKLIST

STRAHAN VISITOR CENTRE
VISITOR OBSERVATIONS
JANUARY 2001

No.	Date:	Start Time:

CODE	LOCATION/EXHIBIT	NO'S	CHILD	W	L	R	T	S	H	O	A	WA	P
1	Standing at Front												
2	Auditorium												
3	Seating Area 1												
4	Seating Area 2 – checkers												
5	Block & Tackle												
6	Standing at Rear												
7	Seating Area 3												
8	Information Area												
9	Information Desk												
10	Souvenirs												
11	Brochures												
12	Computer												
13	Information Area Seating												
14	Rainforest Walk												
15	Aboriginal Exhibit 1												
16	Aboriginal Exhibit 2												
17	Convict Exhibit												
18	Piners' Walk												
19	Piners' Hut												
20	Huon Pine Walk												
21	Art/Photographs												
22	Conservation												
23	Suburban Bungalow												
24	Visitor Book												

CODE	LOCATION/EXHIBIT	NO'S	CHILD	W	L	R	T	S	H	O	A	WA	P
25	Video												
26	Lounge Seating												
27	Mining & Economy												
28	Railway												
29	Forestry												
30	Hydro Dam & Race												
31	Why World Heritage?												
32	Display Seating												
33	Reference Material												
34	Void Area												
35	Exit Panel												

Table 1 Mode of transport cross-tabulated with group characteristics.

		TRAVEL PARTY				TOTAL
		SINGLE	COUPLE	ADULT GROUP	ADULT GROUP WITH CHILDREN	
Mode of Transport	Private car	30 43.5%	44 42.7%	14 56.0%	33 62.3%	121 48.4%
	Rental car	25 36.2%	55 53.4%	9 36.0%	19 35.8%	108 43.2%
	Coach tour	12 17.4%	3 2.9%	1 4.0%	1 1.9%	17 6.8%
	Cycles	1 1.4%	1 1.0%			2 0.8%
	Motorcycles	1 1.4%		1 4.0%		2 0.8%
Total		**69 100.0%**	**103 100.0%**	**25 100.0%**	**53 100.0%**	**250 100.00%**
χ^2 29.332, 12df, p=0.004						

Table 2 Mode of transport cross-tabulated with origin.

		TRAVELLERS ORIGIN			TOTAL
		INTRASTATE	INTERSTATE	INTERNATIONAL	
Mode of Transport	Private car	19 95.0%	95 49.7%	7 17.9%	121 48.4%
	Rental car	1 5.0%	85 44.5%	22 56.4%	108 43.2%
	Coach tour		8 4.2%	9 23.1%	17 6.8%
	Cycles		1 0.5%	1 2.6%	2 0.8%
	Motorcycles		2 1.0%		2 0.8%
Total		**20 100.0%**	**191 100.0%**	**39 100.0%**	**250 100.0%**
χ^2 45.870, 8df, p=0.000					

Table 3 Visitors paying to see the interpretive display by origin.

		VISITORS SEEING THE INTERPRETIVE DISPLAY		TOTAL
		YES	NO	
Travellers origin	Intrastate	7 14.0%	15 7.4%	22 8.7%
	Interstate	38 76.0%	153 75.7%	191 75.8%
	International	5 10.0%	34 16.8%	39 15.5%
Total		**50 100.0%**	**202 100.0%**	**252 100.0%**
χ^2 **3.193, 2df, p=0.203**				

Table 4 Visitors paying to see the interpretive display by visitor group.

		VISITORS SEEING THE INTERPRETIVE DISPLAY		TOTAL
		YES	NO	
Travel party	Single	16 32.0%	55 27.2%	71 28.2%
	Couple	15 30.0%	88 43.6%	103 40.9%
	Adult group	5 10.0%	20 9.9%	25 9.9%
	Adult group with children	14 28.0%	39 19.3%	53 21.0%
Total		**50 100.0%**	**202 100.0%**	**252 100.0%**
χ^2 3.569, 3df, p=0.312				

Table 5 Visitors paying to see the interpretive display by sex.

		VISITORS SEEING THE INTERPRETIVE DISPLAY		
		YES	NO	TOTAL
Sex	Female	24 48.0%	99 49.0%	123 48.8%
	Male	26 52.0%	103 51.0%	129 51.2%
Total		**50 100.0%**	**202 100.0%**	**252 100.0%**
χ^2 0.16, 1df, p=0.898				

Table 6 Visitors paying to see the interpretive display by age.

Visitors seeing the interpretive display

		VISITORS SEEING THE INTERPRETIVE DISPLAY		
		YES	NO	TOTAL
Age	<20		10 5.0%	10 4.0%
	20-29	12 24.0%	39 19.3%	51 20.2%
	30-39	9 18.0%	54 26.7%	63 25.0%
	40-49	13 26.0%	50 24.8%	63 25.0%
	50-59	11 22.0%	35 17.3%	46 18.3%
	>60	5 10.0%	13 6.4%	18 7.1%
	Declined		1 0.5%	1 0.4%
Total		**50 100.0%**	**202 100.0%**	**252 100.0%**
χ^2 5.599, 6df, p=0.470				

Table 7 Duration of stay at the Strahan Visitor Centre.

		VISITORS SEEING THE INTERPRETIVE DISPLAY		
		YES	NO	TOTAL
Time	<5 minutes		64 31.7%	64 25.4%
	5-15 minutes	13 26.0%	96 47.5%	109 43.3%
	15-30 minutes	16 32.0%	26 12.9%	42 16.7%
	30-60 minutes	13 26.0%	8 4.0%	21 8.3%
	>60 minutes	8 16.0%	8 4.0%	16 6.3%
Total		**50 100.0%**	**202 100.0%**	**252 100.0%**
χ^2 61.440, 4df, p=0.000				

Table 8 Overall visitor satisfaction according to sex.

		SEX		
		FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
Overall satisfaction	Unsatisfied	5 4.1%	2 1.6%	7 2.8%
	Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	7 5.7%	22 17.1%	29 11.5%
	Satisfied	54 43.9%	60 46.5%	114 45.2%
	Very satisfied	57 46.3%	45 34.9%	102 40.5%
Total		**123 100.0%**	**129 100.0%**	**252 100.0%**
χ^2 10.635, 3df, p=0.014				

Table 9 Overall visitor satisfaction according to time spent at the centre.

		TIME					
		<5 MIN	5-15 MIN	15-30 MIN	30-60 MIN	>60 MIN	TOTAL
Overall satisfaction	Unsatisfied	1 1.6%	3 2.8%	3 7.1%			7 2.8%
	Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	9 14.1%	16 14.7%	2 4.8%	1 4.8%	1 6.3%	29 11.5%
	Satisfied	33 51.6%	48 44.0%	19 45.2%	8 38.1%	6 37.5%	114 45.2%
	Very satisfied	21 32.8%	42 38.5%	18 42.9%	12 57.1%	9 56.3%	102 40.5%
Total		**64** **100.0%**	**109** **100.0%**	**42** **100.0%**	**21** **100.0%**	**16** **100.0%**	**252** **100.0%**
χ^2 5.562, 3df, p=0.135							

Table 10 Visitor response on paying to see the interpretive display.

		HAPPY PAYING TO SEE THE INTERPRETIVE DISPLAY			
		YES	NO	UNSURE	TOTAL
The display:	Told a good story	42 91.3%	1 50.0%	1 50.0%	44 88.0%
	Did not tell a good story	2 4.3%	1 50.0%		3 6.0%
	Unsure	2 4.3%		1 50.0%	3 6.0%
Total		**46** **100.0%**	**2** **100.0%**	**2** **100.0%**	**50** **100.0%**
χ^2 14.279, 4df, p=0.006					

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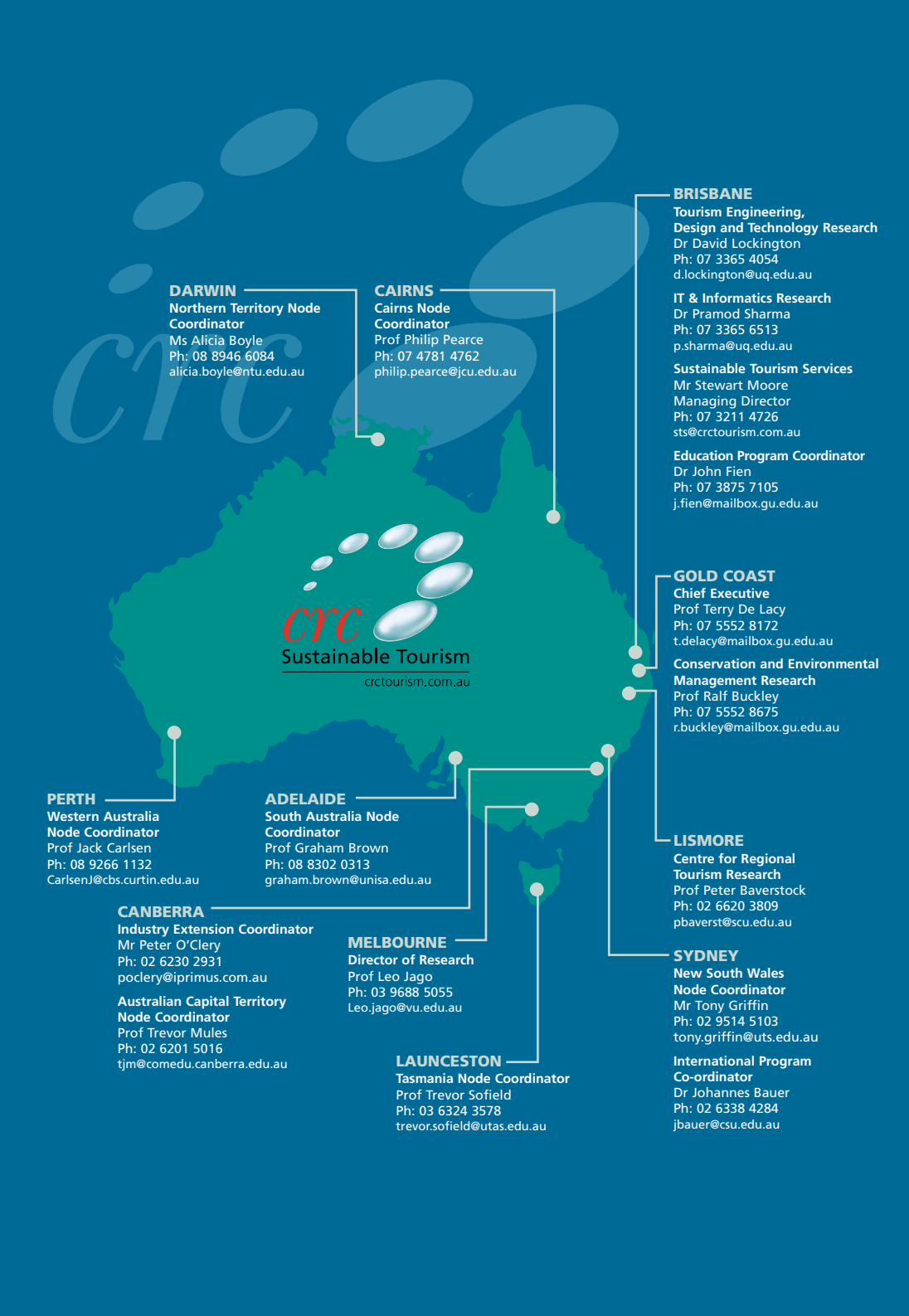

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